

NEBULA

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SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 1 No. 2



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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 1

Editor: PETER HAMILTON JR.

No. 2

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All characters in these stories are entirely fictitious and any resemblance to persons living or dead, is purely coincidental

Look here . . .

Since writing my last Editorial I've been snowed under with all kinds of requests, suggestions and complaints.

I feel this is a very good sign, as it proves that the general public is taking an interest in NEBULA, and for a mag which made its first appearance last September, this is very encouraging.

Since a large number of those who sent me letters requested a statement of Editorial policy, I'd like to make a few points clear.

Although the first two issues of NEBULA have contained a long novel and a few short stories, I don't intend to tie myself or my authors to any such rigid margins. So long as a story is really good it will be bought and published in NEBULA. I am determined to obtain the best reading possible, regardless of cost.

To this end I have enrolled the majority of Britain's best stf writers—a glance at our author line-up will

disperse any doubt in that line. However, I don't intend (as so many other magazines do) to stick to the same small circle of well-known writers, instead, in every issue I will introduce a new or almost new author. After all, some of my present day "discoveries" may well be the Heinleins and Russells of tomorrow. It's up to you to request repeat appearances. This policy also applies to a proportion of the interior artwork in NEBULA.

For those of you who prefer American science fiction, I will publish one story per issue by a well-known U.S. author.

Finally, a word about the last issue. Although I felt that it would be rather difficult to compare the stories in the first NEBULA owing to the discrepancy in their lengths, many people rated them. The most popular, strangely enough, was van Vogt's "Letter from the Stars." "Robots Never Weep" and "The Ass's Ears" were very close competitors for second place.

Peter Hamilton Jr.

Thou Pasture Us

It was as well Sam Tannoy had suffered a head injury in the war otherwise Humanity might have perished!

Illustrated by Alan Hunter

Chapter I.

"I GOT it for Richard's birthday," Ruth Tannoy said.

Sam Tannoy dropped his gaze from the flushed, triumphant face of his wife to the brown-paper parcel which lay on his desk. He raised his brows.

"It is *that* good, Ruth?"

She nodded vigorously. "Open it and see for yourself!"

With curiosity Sam untied the string and removed the paper. Inside was a stout cardboard box. He opened it... his brows rose higher and he whistled. He had never seen a model locomotive so perfect. Its finish was superlative, the detail magnificent, and the whole of such superb design and workmanship that it could scarcely be improved.

"This must have cost more than a month's salary!" he said abruptly.

Ruth shook her head quickly. "No, Sam! I got it at a bargain sale. It was—guess..." She smiled. "Well, I'll tell you! *Fifteen shillings!*" Sam frowned. It seemed incredible. "Then it was a give-away price!" he said. He examined the model critically. It was a midget engineering masterpiece—was, indeed, everything he had ever imagined a perfect model locomotive could be. As he gazed, his brows drew slowly together.

"You're not kidding?" he demanded.

"Cross my heart. I've still got the price tab."

She dropped it on the desk and Sam picked it up. "Loco, price 15s." he read, and turned the slip over. On the back was

printed "*The Heavenly Toy Stores*," and the name of a street which he recognised.

"It doesn't run under its own power," Ruth said apologetically. "None of the models were the kind that work — but I thought it fine—"

"It's superb," Sam agreed.

He tried to remember the shops along the street, but could not recall seeing the *Heavenly Toy Stores*. It must be a new shop, he supposed. If not, he would certainly have noticed it. His eyes returned to the loco and he pursed his lips.

"It must have been some model-maker's masterpiece!" he decided.

"Oh, no." Ruth shook her head. "There were scores of them—"

"Scores!"

"Yes, and other models, too—all just as good."

Sam let her words sink in. He stroked the beautiful finish of the model, moving away the wrappings so that it could stand alone on his desk. He examined it closely for some flaw. There was none.

"Scores, all at fifteen shillings?" he asked.

"Yes. And lots of other things. It's a new shop and there was a queue."

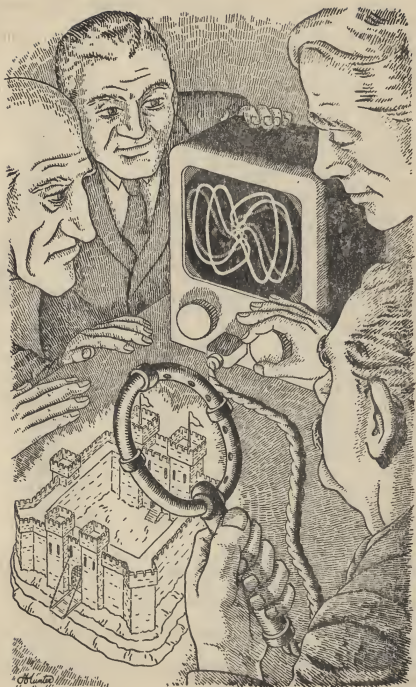
Sam drew in his lips. "I'm going to take a look myself!" he declared. "This engine makes what I bought for Richard's birthday look like scrap!"

He let himself out, frowning. It seemed quite impossible that anyone, however prosperous, could afford to sell such models at the price, he thought. At fifteen *pounds* it would still have been cheap.

The shop could not be missed. It shone with new blue paint and a queue of goggle-eyed youngsters and anxious parents stood outside it. The window was full of models, some of which Sam could glimpse over the shoulders of the crowd. If any doubt had existed, it disappeared when he saw the toys, and the brilliant gold lettering above the window. The queue was moving slowly, and a stream of people clutching brown-paper parcels emerged from a second door. Sam took his position and after a long wait found himself inside. A tall man in a long blue smock was regulating the inflow.

"When is the sale over?" Sam asked.

The man gave him a fleeting glance. "Not today."



"But you can't go on like this!" Sam objected. "Your stock will be gone!"

The man let two boys in and looked at him. "You represent a wholesale buyer?"

"N-no."

"Then make your purchase, if you're going to, and get out. We're busy."

The back of a bristly neck was presented and Sam shrugged, moving on. The toys occupied shelves from floor to ceiling and there was no sign that stocks were low. Locomotives like that which Ruth had purchased filled many shelves. Sam examined them and moved on. There were automobiles and tanks, Noah's Arks... model garages... every type of toy which a child could want. All were new, brilliant, splendid. Sam frowned in the creamy overhead lighting. There was one thing odd only—every model, despite its type, was about the same size. And somehow looking at them all made his eyes and head ache.

Farther along were presents for adults, fancy items of such variety that Sam's head swam to look at them. He went back, chose a model theatre, and had it wrapped.

"How do you get them at the price?" he asked curiously.

The assistant nodded towards the door. "Jones is the boss. Better ask him."

He gave his attention to another customer. Sam went out. Jones seemed too busy to talk to anyone, he thought. Outside, he stood for a few moments watching the crowds that still gathered round the window, then turned on his heel and strode for home.

It was scarcely a week since he had been by the site of the *Heavenly Toy* stores, he thought. The store had not been open then, he was sure. Striving to remember, he decided that there had been a drab tobacconist's and newsagent's shop about there. Whoever was responsible for the *Heavenly Toy* stores had evidently worked quickly.

He turned out into a busy street and crossed it, making for a back way which would lead him home. Normally, he would have taken a bus, he thought. But this evening he wanted to walk. The air would clear his head. He blinked. His eyes seemed a little out of focus so that the houses and gardens each side were blurred. Perhaps he had been working too hard at the office, he thought.

Ruth was standing at the garden gate. He thought she looked a trifle pale, but she smiled.

"Richard's delighted," she said.

Sam halted, examining her critically. A slight darkness lay under her eyes and her forehead was very white against the deep brunette of her hair.

"You look tired," he said abruptly.

She nodded. "Perhaps Sam. I've a bit of a headache."

Sam opened the gate. "Linda come in yet?"

"No. She's been rather late from evening classes these last few weeks"

They went in. The house seemed unusually silent, Sam thought. Richard usually met him with a whoop and all the noise that an eleven year old schoolboy in high spirits could produce. Linda, at nineteen, was more like Ruth. Sam looked at his wife quickly. These three were all that really mattered in the world, to him, he thought, then wondered why the thought had come.

Richard sat on the floor, his arms around his knees gazing at the locomotive on the rug before him. He did not move and seemed unaware that the door had opened.

"Hullo, son," Sam said.

"Hullo"

Richard did not look round. That in itself was unusual, Sam thought. Nor did he spring up, demanding to be shown his birthday present. Instead, his gaze remained on the loco; his chin rested on his knees and his sandy head was tilted forward. He appeared oblivious to everything except the *Heavenly Toy*.

Sam put the object he had purchased behind his back and withdrew from the room. In the passage, he turned and went abruptly into his study, closing the door, his lips compressed. He placed the package on the desk, untied the string, hesitated, re-tied it, and locked the whole, unopened, in one of the large bottom drawers.

After a time he heard Linda come in, humming. A murmur of voices came and he knew that she was helping Ruth to wash up, but he did not go out to them.

He went to bed early and slept uneasily. The others were very quiet and he did not know what time Linda and Richard went to bed. Once he woke suddenly, sure that bare feet crept by his door, going downstairs. The luminous bedside clock showed an hour long after midnight. He must have been mistaken, he thought. The house was silent.

He awoke unusually late and went down. Richard had a school book propped against the coffee pot and looked tired. Sam yawned.

"You should do your homework before going to bed, son."

Ruth poured out. "He was playing with the loco."

Sam drank, frowning. He wondered at what hour the others *had* gone to bed. Richard put aside the book.

"I—I want to stay home, dad."

Sam replaced his cup, striving to make it appear that everything was normal. But he noted that his hand shook—that was *not* normal . . .

"Why, son?" he asked quietly.

Richard flushed slowly. "I—I want to play with the loco..."

Sam swallowed and drew in his lips. His throat felt dry and he remembered the footsteps that had passed by his door.

"You came down in the night, son," he stated.

"I—I wanted to see my loco!" Richard pushed back his chair. "I—I've never had an engine like *that* before!"

Sam looked at his plate and Ruth moved uneasily. "It was difficult to get him away from it and to bed at all, Sam."

Sam raised his eyes, choosing his words. "Glad you like it, son," he said slowly. Richard's face had a curious, pinched expression, he thought — an expression which had not been there the previous morning. "Still, you don't need to stay away from school—"

The chair scraped back, the book fell to the floor, and Richard stood up, his face twitching.

"I—I *love it!*" he declared. "*It loves me, too!* I'm only happy when I'm with it!"

The door banged. In the silence Sam felt Ruth's hand on his arm. He subsided again into his chair, relaxing his muscles by conscious effort. Linda came in humming, looked at the clock, and smiled, cutting toast.

"I'll be late if I don't hurry—"

Sam felt that there was nothing to say. He could only hope that things were normal—*believe* that they were . . .

Linda finished and went out humming. He saw her go down the path. *She likes her work*, he thought. It helped him to feel wholly sane to think of a simple, straightforward thing like that. Thinking of *other* things, it was less easy to be sure.

When he went out to work Richard had not gone to school. Instead he was seated on the floor gazing at the loco. Sam felt his gaze drawn to it, scowled, and went out. "*It loves me, too!*" Richard had said. He wondered what that meant.

He decided that it would need only a few minutes more to take the road where the blue-fronted shop had so mysteriously

appeared. The queue was large, the stock undiminished. A fat man was arguing at the door, a brown-paper parcel in his arms.

"I don't *want* a refund!" he was saying. "Take it back, that's all—just take it back! My boys wouldn't go to bed last night until I threatened to have the hide off 'em!"

"Goods are sold as they stand and cannot be taken back." The man in the blue smock was obviously quoting, and Sam recognised him as Jones.

"Then what can I do?" the fat man pleaded.

Jones shrugged. "Destroy it."

The fat man shook. "I—I *can't*."

"Then give it away."

Jones retreated into the doorway. The fat man hesitated then went on, paused at a doorway, looked round, and dropped the package on the step. Sam touched his shoulder and he jumped.

"I—I was only going to leave it here—"

"So I've gathered," Sam said. "Tell me what happened." He felt sudden relief that Richard was not the only lad who had lost sleep.

The other blew out his cheeks perspiring. "It was a present for my kids—but I don't like the way they took to it!"

Sam nodded. "It was the same with my boy. What did you mean when you said you couldn't destroy it?"

"Exactly that—I *couldn't*."

Sam frowned. "You mean it was indestructible?"

"No." The fat man mopped his face. "I—*couldn't*. It seemed like—like *murder*."

He floundered into silence. *It seemed like murder*, Sam thought as he went on. The fat man, rubicund and clearly as sane as anyone, had said *that*.

To Sam, work seemed to go badly and he felt detached from it. In his mind he went over what had happened a hundred times, sometimes scarcely seeing the copy spread on his desk, or hearing the clatter of typewriters in the offices beyond. At lunch time he slipped out. A long queue waited outside the *Heavenly Toy* stores, moving slowly. A placard announced that a *Heavenly Stores* for adults had opened. Sam noted its address and returned to work. He would visit this second branch on his way home, that very evening, he decided.

A queue stretched to a brilliant blue facade; Sam joined it and emerged inside, wondering what kind of goods would be on view.

There were china Toby figures, statuettes, and ornaments of

every type. All had three things in common, he thought as he moved through the crush. None could serve any imaginable *useful* purpose; all were similar in size, as the toys had been—and all had the same superb finish. So superb were they, he longed to stand and stare for ever. The detail was magnificent, the brilliant colouring wonderful...everyone seemed hushed with amaze, and spoke in low voices. He was aware that his eyes and head had begun to ache, and went slowly towards the exit. On shelves on the right stood rows of delicately-formed posies, each apparently made in one piece with a tiny pot as base for the flowers. Against his will he halted, gazing at them.

Never before had such exquisite workmanship existed, he thought. The petals and leaves were more vivid than those of freshly picked flowers. The grouping was perfect. Gazing at them, he thought that each was such perfection that none could be improved... His hand went into another pocket, feeling for his note-case.

"Damned if I do!" he growled.

His lips compressed and he half-turned on his heel. Something seemed to tug at his eyes; just one more glance, he thought. There was no harm in *looking* !

Half an hour later he stamped into his study and dropped the brown-paper parcel on the desk. Since making the purchase he had striven to rationalise his action—it would be a nice present for Ruth, he told himself. But he knew that was not the real reason. The china flowers, all one with their base, had been too beautiful to resist

He untied the string, opening the box, and glanced at the clock. Seven-thirty. He would give the posy to Ruth right away, he thought

The flowers were utterly beautiful, the colours so vivid, the grouping so attractive, that he sat down abruptly in his chair, gazing at them in ecstasy. *Ruth would be pleased*, he thought. Then, after a little while, he ceased to think; sitting, instead, in mute admiration

The opening of the door made him jump. Ruth looked in, her face puzzled.

"I heard you come in over an hour ago, dear. You're not working—?"

Her gaze fell upon the flowers. She stopped; her lips parted and her eyes sparkled. She came to the desk, reaching out a hand, but did not touch them.

An hour ago, Sam thought. He dragged his gaze to the

clock. *Twenty to nine.* He swore, got unsteadily to his feet, and lurched from the study. Outside, he stood for a moment with his back to the wall, recovering his composure.

More than an hour, he thought. It had seemed mere moments.

He gripped the knob and opened the study door. Ruth had moved round to his chair and sat upon its edge, her elbows on the desk, her chin on her palms, gazing at the posy. On her face was a blank, rapt expression; her lips were slightly parted, her breathing hastened.

Sam closed his eyes, refusing to look again, and dragged shut the door. He listened. The house was strangely still. If Linda was in, no humming revealed it. Nor did one of the score of usual noises tell of Richard's presence. Perhaps he was out, Sam hoped. Perhaps . . .

Biting his lip he went along the passage to the living-room and opened the door. Richard knelt on the hearth-rug, gazing at the loco, so still that he might have been no living boy, but a carved figure. The same dreamy expression was on his face and he did not look up.

It was all wrong, Sam thought. He felt as if he had been toppled out of the safe, ordinary world of ordinary happenings into something both unexpected and odd. He would make an end to it, he thought. Pitch the *Heavenly Toys* out of the house and return things to normal! Then Richard would become his usual, wideawake self; Ruth would cease to daydream, and everything would be as usual—

He closed the door at his back.

"Richard—" he said.

Chapter II.

"Richard!" Sam repeated.

There was no response. He stepped forward, took Richard's shoulders, lifted him bodily as if he were again a baby, and carried him into the kitchen. There, he shook him gently.

"You'll go to school tomorrow, son," he stated.

A flush spread over the round young face and life returned to the glazed eyes. Richard shook his head.

"I shan't go, dad," he declared.

Sam felt that here was some of his own stubbornness. "You will—"

"I'll not, then! You can't make me!"

Sam sat on the edge of the kitchen table and wondered why the retort did not make him feel angry. He was not angry—only puzzled and determined to end the fascination of the *Heavenly Toys* once and for all.

"We'll see," he said evenly. "Tell me—why don't you want to go?"

Richard avoided his eyes, moving towards the door. "I—I want to stay home and play with my loco!"

Sam caught his arm, holding him gently. "You won't learn that way, son," he pointed out. "Better go to school as usual, and forget it."

The ruffled head shook with fierce determination. Sam breathed hard words against the *Heavenly Toy* stores, but smiled.

"We can't go on like this." He tried to make it sound all a joke. "You'll have to go tomorrow—"

The reaction took him unawares. Eyes flashing, fists suddenly upraised, boots flying, Richard struggled to be free.

"You don't understand! Oh, you don't understand!" he cried.

A toe caught Sam's shin. He gasped, jumping from the table, and lost his hold. Richard shot free and jerked open the door. His feet echoed in the passage and a door banged. Sam limped out and to the other room.

Richard was kneeling on the rug, his gaze rapturously on the locomotive. Only the rapid rise and fall of his shoulders told of his previous haste. Sam withdrew and stood in the passage. *Hell*, he thought, *what is this?*

He returned to his study. Ruth was gazing at the posy and he snorted. She looked at him fleetingly.

"Thanks so much, Sam, they're lovely—"

One of us is going nuts," he said.

He snatched the posy and wrappings and made an untidy parcel.

"They're going to the rubbish bin!" he declared.

"Oh no, Sam *no, no!*"

When Ruth had finished Sam had been told many things. He was cruel-hearted and unkind; it was a sin even to *think* of destroying something so beautiful; he had *given* her the posy and couldn't take it away... she wouldn't let him take it away. He knew that he was beaten and withdrew, silent. On the surface of things, Ruth was right. "You're just being silly, Sam," she had said. He wondered whether that was true. Perhaps he was overworked, imagining things . . . No, he thought. The fat

man outside the store had not been imagination. The queues had been real enough; so were the blue-fronted stores.

The door-bell rang. He waited. Ruth usually liked to answer it, but the study door did not open. He shrugged and went along the passage. His grudges against the Heavenly Toys were mounting, he decided.

A man, very smart, stood on the lower step. Sam judged him to be about twenty-five. Tall, quite slender, he held his hat in one hand, revealing a mass of crisp dark hair.

"Is Linda ready?" he asked.

Sam examined him and liked what he saw. He shook his head.

"Sorry, son. She's not in."

Disappointment came to the open, friendly face. "But I arranged to call—"

"I'm sorry." Sam wondered whether he should ask the other in, and decided against it. With Ruth and Richard entranced into silence the house wasn't the same. "She must have been kept late," he said.

"She didn't—leave a message for me?"

"No."

The young man put on his hat. "I see."

"I'll tell her you called," Sam said.

He closed the door regretfully, wondering what had happened. Linda was not usually late. If she was, she rang from the office. The house was silent and he got himself supper, but ate little. Afterwards, he sat for a long time, while the evening gloom changed to darkness, pondering. *It would* be possible to drag Ruth and Richard forcefully away from contemplation of their Heavenly Toys, he thought. But that was not the way. They would only look upon him as an enemy... Instead, he must discover why the toys fascinated and somehow break the power they held.

Linda came in very late. Sam noticed that she had a parcel under one arm and that she looked tired.

"There was a young man to see you," he said.

Momentary interest came into her eyes, but died. "Oh, Paul... I forgot."

She went to the stairs. Much of the usual spring had vanished from her step. Noting it, Sam felt concerned.

"Supper's ready," he suggested.

"Don't want any—got a headache."

She went up from sight and he heard her bedroom door

close. Once again the house was completely silent. He swore under his breath. *Twenty-four hours ago we were normal, sane people*, he thought. Now, Ruth occupied his study, Richard doubtless sat still as a Buddha in the living-room, and he himself was alone and fuming in the kitchen. Upstairs, Linda made no sound. The brown-paper package had been of familiar size.

"I've got to be careful," Sam said aloud.

He wished that he had asked Paul in. They could have argued the matter out together. It was one requiring tact, Sam thought. He felt out of his depth. Perhaps a walk would clear his head, he decided suddenly.

The lamp-lit streets were quiet and he turned towards the city-centre. The wider roads were not so busy as he had expected. Buses passed, but they were not full. Cinema and theatre audiences were beginning to return homeward, but even there the people seemed few. Cars and other vehicles passed, but not many. A solitary policeman stood on a corner under a lamp.

"Very quiet, tonight," Sam said.

"Yes, sir. Don't think I ever remember it so quiet, sir."

Sam went on. Never so quiet, he thought. Nor, since Linda had been born, had his own house been so quiet! He halted, rock still. *Never so quiet*, he thought. *Was it the same cause?*

The possibility shocked him. "No!" he said aloud. He refused to believe that thousands of people, in thousands of houses scattered throughout the city, were sitting quietly at home—*admiring their Heavenly Toys!* Yet the streets *were* quiet, the cinema audiences small

"Great grief! What'll become of everything?" he murmured.

He turned abruptly back. His walk through the streets had lost its appeal. The policeman nodded again, apparently glad of companionship.

"Almost as quiet as during the black-out, sir," he said.

Sam halted, thinking of the years now long past. Sirens had wailed, the city been hushed. Now it was hushed—but undramatically. He had walked those streets with Ruth on leave. Had walked them again later, convalescing. Ruth had been a nurse. He got off lightly, Sam thought. The doctor had decided he would be clever and had put a silver plate on his skull. Sam was confident that it had been unnecessary—he had always claimed to be thick-headed. But the plate was there, usually quite forgotten. Sam touched his head. He seldom wore a hat and his hair grew thickly over the very spot.

It's nice to have them days past and everything quiet," the policeman said.

Sam nodded. "Yes. Yes, very nice."

He turned for home, hastening. No lights shone in the windows and he halted on the garden path. Quite a number of houses along the road had been darkened, too, he realised, and wondered why.

A quick glance showed him that Ruth and Richard had gone to bed. The idea that had been forming in his mind grew in determination. He locked himself in his study and took out the model theatre, now never to be a gift to anyone. Placing it on the desk he examined it critically. It was apparently cast in one piece and without moving parts; yet, in some inexplicable way, it compelled his admiration. He bent closer, studying its outline. The contours seemed to shimmer—it could be the brilliant light on the translucent finish, he decided. Yet it made his eyes ache to examine it, and the aching gradually extended through his head. Abruptly, illogically, he felt that the silver plate on his skull was *warm* . . .

"I'm going nuts," he said aloud.

Yet the sensation persisted. His eyes ached. The outline of the model seemed to shimmer like a mirage, and the feeling of warmth did not go. He strove to analyse the sensation. It was not pain. The silver plate had never hurt or felt uncomfortable. Usually he was totally unaware of its presence. But now...*now* it seemed to be undergoing a definite rise in temperature. He scowled at the theatre.

"I'll take the damned thing apart!" he declared aloud.

He got a metal saw, hammer and chisel from the tool shed. Back in his study, he gazed at the model with his lips compressed. It almost seemed to *glow*—almost to vibrate... It was beautiful... very beautiful . . .

He knew, quite suddenly, that he could not do it. He hid the tools away, feeling half ashamed, and bundled the model into its wrappings and thrust it away once again. Then he hurried from the study, locking the door on the outside.

The house was quiet as an empty building. No sound came from any of the bedrooms. Biting his lips, he stood in the passage, wondering what to do. The clock in the living-room began to chime and he counted the strokes. Eleven. Time for bed, he thought. But he knew that he would not sleep. Abruptly he thought of the blue-fronted stores, and of the queues that had

been outside them. It seemed time to make investigation from that end.

The store was closed for the night but a glow filtered from an inner office. Sam hammered on the door, where a notice listed the numerous branches that had opened. After a long wait a man he did not recognise appeared.

"What's the matter? Fire or something—?"

Sam put a toe in the door. "I want to talk to you."

"We're closed."

Sam got half way through. "I want to see Jones."

"He's gone." The man looked irritated. "Given up—cleared out. I'm boss here now and don't want visitors."

"Cleared out!" Sam felt momentarily beaten. "Why?"

"Don't ask me, bud."

Sam thought quickly. "Can you give me his address?"

"Ye-e-s—if it'll make you clear off!"

The man went to his office. Sam looked round. In the dim light rows upon rows of *Heavenly Toys* stood upon the shelves, awaiting the morrow. Jones had not given up because stock was exhausted, Sam thought.

The man returned, grumbling, a slip of paper in one hand. "Now get out," he said. "Some people have work to do."

The building lay in a little back street and Sam checked the address under the nearest lamp. Apparently Jones had not been well off, despite the undoubted selling ability of the lines he stocked. Jones opened the door only after five minutes of continuous ringing and looked out suspiciously. Sam decided that he had not been to bed; thick stubble made his face dark and bristly and his eyes were red and tired.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

Sam nodded. "You've a good memory for faces. Mind if I come in?"

Jones looked round at something outside Sam's vision. "I'm busy," he said.

"You can spare a few minutes."

Jones puffed out his hairy cheeks. "I've nothing to do with the shop, now—"

"I know."

"Then it's nothing to do with either of us."

"There are some things I'm making my business." Sam ignored the hint. "The sooner you let me in the sooner I can go."

The other grunted and opened the door. The room was shabby. Sam's eyes took it in quickly and his gaze alighted on

something he had half expected to find. A statuette stood on a table by the fireless grate. Its size and finish were unmistakeable.

"So you threw up your job just to stay here and admire *that*," Sam suggested, stiff lipped.

"So what? I've only got meself to please!" He stood by the table and stroked the tiny figure. His face changed. "It's swell," he said softly. "Beautiful, see. Lovely..."

Jones seemed to be going into a trance and Sam thought of Ruth and Richard and wondered how many other people through the city were under the same spell.

"How did you get the manager's job?" he asked.

Jones started and dragged his gaze away from the statuette. He sighed, obviously very tired. "I was an out of work salesman. A letter came offering me a fair salary and a line which they said couldn't fail. I'd heard that last part before, but took the job. I was sent money and told to use my initiative, as they put it. That's all."

"It never struck you that there was something—*odd* about the deal, or about the goods?"

"No. Why should it?"

The tired eyes reverted to the statuette, glazing. Sam took Jones's shoulder and turned him round so that his back was to the table. He did not resist. His cheeks sagged and his face was grey.

"Where's that letter?" Sam hid his eagerness. "I'm looking into this for personal reasons."

Jones shrugged and began to search through papers which were heaped on an open desk. He brought out a crumpled sheet and invoices printed with the same heading. Sam noted the address. According to the headings Jones had dealt directly with the head offices, which were twenty miles out of the city.

"How did the goods come?" Sam asked curiously.

"By lorry. When I wrote for stocks they always arrived within twenty four hours."

Sam saw that Jones was almost asleep on his feet. He guided him to an armchair, put a cushion behind his head and lifted his feet on to a stool. Jones's eyes closed and he began to snore. Sam thrust the statuette into the bottom drawer of the desk and kicked it shut. He examined the dusty room, then let himself out. It seemed that Jones knew no more.

As he walked back through the quiet streets Sam decided that the head offices of the *Heavenly Toy Co.* should receive an unexpected visitor—himself. Not that night; it was too late.

But just as soon as he could take time off from the news syndicate office. The blue-fronted shops might become news; even if not, something *odd* was happening.

Ruth and the others were asleep and he left them undisturbed. He himself needed sleep badly, he thought as he undressed.

He stood for a few moments at the window, looking out across the rooftops, and wondering what was happening in the thousands of silent houses. Lights were going out. Only in a few upper windows did they remain on, showing that there, at least, people were still awake. He wondered *why* they were not seeking sleep.

Away in the east, far beyond the city, a pale mauve line extended from heaven to earth and he frowned, striving to pick it out more clearly. So dim was it that he wondered whether his eyes were deceived. Like a slender, stationary searchlight beam, but almost blue, it extended up through the night sky. Probably it was the light streaming from the skylight of some building, he thought, and returned to his bed.

As he took off his slippers he wondered whether he would be able to get away the next day, to visit the *Heavenly Toy Co.* The journey itself would waste an hour, both ways... He became motionless, remembering the address he had obtained from Jones's letter. It was east, far beyond the city... in fact at just about the spot where the mauve beam had appeared to be!

He returned to the window quickly. The faint pencil of light had gone.

Chapter III.

He awoke rather late. Ruth prepared breakfast with almost her accustomed efficiency, but seemed disinclined to talk. Richard and Linda were still asleep when he set out; both looked so tired that he left them undisturbed.

The outer office of the Russell News Syndicate building seemed to hum with slightly less than its usual activity. Sam passed between the desks to his own room, rose his brows, sat down in his swivel chair and dialled the inter-office phone. An irascible voice snapped something unintelligible.

"That Mr. Russell?" Sam said. "Tannoy here. Where's my stenographer?"

"Oh, you." The tone was mollified. "I was afraid you

wouldn't turn up, either! How we're supposed to turn out news with a quarter of the staff absent beats me!"

Sam let him finish. "I want three things, Mr. Russell. Given them, I can promise you a story you'll be glad to run. I want time off"—he ignored the interruption—"to look into something I consider *big*. I want a list of staff who are absent, and a copy of reports that have come in during the night with reference to certain new chain stores—"

"The *Heavenly Toy* stores!" Russell's snort made the desk reproducer vibrate. "I can guess that much! The report will be along. So will the list of the absent staff. You can look them up when you're out—and they'd better have good reasons!"

Sam felt interested. "You've heard of the *Heavenly Toys*?"

"Heard of them! I'll say I've heard of them, Tannoy! And what I've heard doesn't make sense!"

"Maybe there *is* sense—if we can find it."

"Try. Ring me when you've news."

The line went dead. A boy brought a list and a thin sheaf of papers and Sam sat back and read. This meant that he would be calling on the *Heavenly Toy Co.* within a few hours, he thought with satisfaction. The list of absentees was of moderate length; he noted that most were girls and women, but that could have been chance. Reports that had arrived during the night repeated the same story but added little new. Branches of the *Heavenly Toy Co.* had opened almost simultaneously throughout the city. There were the same stories of eager queues of buyers. One report seemed to hint, in guarded terms, that the toys were of a somewhat unusual nature. Nothing more. Sam put the sheaf in his desk and went out. He had not realised, before, that so many branches had opened. . . .

He got his small saloon from the nearby garage and looked up the nearest name on his list. His personal stenographer was gazing with rapt eyes at a china cat and had slept the night in a chair near it. She was anxious for him to be gone.

"Tell Mr. Russell that I'm sorry, Mr. Tannoy," she said at the door. "I'd got a headache and didn't feel up to coming."

A clerk and switchboard operator told similar stories. Sam dropped the list into the gutter as he left his third place of call, and rang Russell.

"They're ill," he stated. "Tell you more when I get back."

It was half a lie, he thought as he drove on. But there was no point in beginning a scare if nothing lay behind it. His boss would not thank him for doing so. The Russell News Syndicate

had a name for dealing in real news, not nine-day wonders based primarily on some reporter's imagination.

He wound out of the city, accelerating as the building dropped behind. Occasional vehicles passed him, and once three heavy lorries, painted blue and lettered *The Heavenly Toy Co.* in gold rumbled by towards the suburbs. Soon he emerged upon a high road which snaked down a long slope, and he braked to a halt. Sun shone on the panorama of countryside and on long, low buildings painted light blue. They extended over several acres, he judged, and even at such a distance it was impossible to mistake the lorries which stood outside the buildings or swept through the wide gates. Men moved like ants, loading crates. Apart from the other buildings stood offices, neat and bright. Sam examined the layout carefully, memorising its details. Nothing indicated which of the buildings formed the factory itself.

He drove down a wooded road and in through the main gate. He saw, now, that the buildings were not new, but reconditioned and repainted. A sign above the door said "Head Office." Sam parked his car and went in. An outer office was empty, but had the appearance of being in general use. An inner door bore the words "Mr. Kedrick" on a frosted-glass panel. This was a chance to see the boss himself, Sam thought, and knocked. A voice bade him enter.

The inner office was big. Behind a huge desk, centrally placed, sat a bald man so enormous that to Sam he seemed to be bulging out of his heavy swivel chair. He looked up, his eyes bulbous behind glasses, and laid down a file that he had been consulting.

"You wanted something?" he asked.

Sam closed the door. Never before had he heard such a silky voice—it might have been a woman's. Yet a look at the eyes, and a subtle undertone to the words, told that Kedrick was a man conscious of his own power.

"I'm interested in the *Heavenly Toys*," Sam said. He knew, now, what line he would take.

"Ah!" The fat man beamed over his desk. "You wish to become an agent for our goods?"

Sam nodded. "That was my idea."

Kedrick put his fingers together in a pyramid. "We have no difficulty in securing agents. Our goods sell readily."

They do, Sam thought. *Too readily!* He nodded again, hoping that he looked his part.

"I'd like to try," he said. "I travel a lot into the more

remote country areas. I've noticed that you have branches already open, but don't aim to compete with them. Instead, I hope to offer the goods to clients which otherwise you might not secure."

It sounded good, he thought, and waited expectantly. Kedrick opened a drawer and threw a printed form onto the desk.

"A sound point. Our terms are one month's salary in advance plus a supply of goods on credit. Repeat orders will be met within twenty-four hours. You deduct your commission and forward the balance to us."

"That seems generous," Sam said. He stole a glance round the office. It could have been the inner sanctum of any successful business enterprise. "Can I see the goods?"

"Certainly." Kedrick depressed a bell-push on his desk. "I'll have you taken around to the stockrooms. Sign up with the clerk in the booking office." He paused. His features sank into a heavy, grave expression. "That's all. But I have two items of personal advice, neither of which you will find in the agreement note—don't live with you're stock, and keep it moving. Anything not sold within two weeks should come back to us for replacement—for your own sake."

A clerk entered and Sam followed him out, wondering what Kedrick's last words had meant. *Don't live with your stock.* That was an odd thing to say.

When he left he had decided that the toys were not manufactured in any of the buildings. All were store-rooms, and as he passed through the uniformity of size of the *Heavenly Toys* struck him forcibly. None were large, none small. A carton suitable for any one would have done for any of the others. He wondered whether that fact meant anything.

From a box at a village a mile down the road he rang Ruth and told her that he would not be home that day. Then he contacted Russell.

"I'm staying over-night, boss, to watch," he said. "Another thing—they think I'm a travelling salesman and to keep up appearances I shall have to take delivery. I can't take the stuff home. How about dumping it in your basement?"

Russell said something that the earpiece would not render intelligibly. "Can do—if you must!"

"If I don't they'll know I'm no salesman!"

"Very well. Anything else?"

"Nothing certain," Sam said. "There's a big store here, but no manufacturing plant. I plan to watch for consignments coming in."

"A good idea," Russell agreed.

Sam left the box and ate sandwiches in his car. He drove up a side lane, parked under trees, and climbed a hillside which overlooked the *Heavenly Toy Co.* No goods arrived, but he counted over twenty lorry-loads taken away. Every lorry that left was stacked high with packing-cases, roped in position and covered with a tarpaulin. Each that came carried nothing.

It grew dark and he walked down to the road, watching. The traffic ceased, but no vehicles arrived. He prowled round the outer limits of the buildings, then brought his saloon down to the road and sat in it, determined not to sleep. When at last dawn came he was sure of one thing—no single load of *Heavenly Toys*, or anything else, had arrived.

When the offices opened he asked to go through the store-rooms again. "Maybe something else will take my fancy," he explained.

A clerk took him. Heavy with sleep, yet keenly awake, Sam followed in and out of the long, low buildings. "No—I think maybe I'll make do with what I ordered yesterday, for now," he said at last. He left, preoccupied. Twenty large lorry-loads of *Heavenly Toys* had been taken away. And the store-rooms were as full as they had been the previous day.

Home, he saw that the wheels of life had slowed an infinitesimal degree more. The streets were a trifle less busy than normal, occasional shops had not opened, for no apparent reason. Children came shouting from a school at the top of the road, but their numbers were few. The others, Sam thought savagely, would be sitting at home in mute adoration of some *Heavenly Toy*.

Richard was pale and a trifle nervy. Ruth had obviously lost much sleep and the rooms were untidy and uncleaned. She greeted him briefly, did not ask what he had been doing, and began to retreat along the passage towards the study. The door closed behind her. Sam reached it in two strides and flung it wide. The posy he had bought stood on the desk and Ruth was sinking into a chair facing it.

Sam closed the door and stood with his back to it. "What is this?" he grated and felt astonished at the harshness of his own voice. "Everything's going to hell while folk stare at these things!" His gaze switched to the posy. It was splendid, he admitted—fascinating. Yet not to such an extent that ordinary existence must come to an end! What's going to happen if you don't get over this silliness?" he demanded. "Is everything to end on the rocks because of a few stupid playthings?"

That was what was happening, he thought suddenly. Undramatically, life itself was faltering in its stride. Men stayed home from work, children from school . . . similar scenes must be arising in uncounted homes . . . the life of the city itself was hesitating. His eyes fixed on the posy with loathing. For the first time he felt real hate, bitter and unrestrained, and strengthened by an element of terror. With one quick movement he caught the posy and flung it with all his strength into the fireless grate.

It did not break; seemed, instead, to bounce without sound. Ruth fell on her knees, clutching it to her breast.

"Sam!" He had never seen her so passionate, so angry. "You mustn't, oh, you *mustn't*!"

Sobbing, she pushed past him and into the passage. Sam heard her running up the stairs, and her bedroom door banged.

"Heaven help us," he said flatly.

He sat down, abruptly very tired, and reviewed what he had learned. The more he pondered, the more puzzled he became. Of one thing he was certain—the *Heavenly Toys* were not being sold at a profit. That was impossible. What, then, could the motive be? He did not know.

He remembered the model he had purchased to give to Richard, and stood it on his desk. It was a splendid model, he thought . . . a beautiful model, admirably made . . .

He grunted, pulled himself together, and forced himself to stand with his back to it, gazing out of the window. He strove to analyse its fascination for him, but failed. At last he went upstairs, flung himself on his bed, and slept.

When he awoke it was dark and he realised exactly how tired he had been. Ruth slept on, one hand extended as if she had fallen asleep caressing the posy. He examined it, almost taking it up, then remembered how impassioned she had been. Best to let her sleep on, he thought.

He went down, brows drawn together in thought. The model theatre was on his desk exactly as he had left it. Oddly enough, he had half expected that it would have moved . . .

He gazed at it under the brilliant light, striving again to analyse its subtle power over him. It *demand*ed admiration, so that he was happy just to look at it . . .

He sat down and dropped his head on his arms. He could see the model by lifting his eyes, he thought. He bit his lip and kept his gaze averted. Something in his mind seemed to whisper that it was foolish to deny himself the pleasure of looking at it;

he *wanted* to look at it . . . surely to do so must be harmless. . . ?

He lifted his eyes, holding his nerves taut as wire. The model *was* beautiful . . . he simply wanted to stare at it, not moving

"I'm daft!" he said aloud.

He got up, pushing the chair backwards, and dragged his eyes away from the model. Staring at the blank wall, he strove to remember its details. He could not. Instead, an odd thought came. *It was not a model theatre at all. It only looked like one so that he could keep it on his desk. Its true form was something the human eye could not see.*

Impossible! he thought.

He felt for the model, touching it. Its outline seemed definite enough. Yet there was an odd feeling at his finger-tips, he thought. He did not seem to be touching a *substance*. Instead, there was something which *vibrated*, intangibly different.

Moving by touch he opened a drawer and took out a case of drawing instruments, selecting a compass with sharp metal points. Opening them, he prodded at the surface of the model. The points met resistance then went through. He moved them from side to side. The steel needles simply appeared to vanish where the surface of the *Heavenly Toy* lay, but left no mark. He frowned—swore—abruptly released the compass and sucked his fingers... The metal was *hot*—almost cherry-red at the tips, with the heat spreading upwards.

Merciful heaven, he thought, *what is this?*

He stepped back a pace, nerves jangling, wondering what it was he had discovered.

Abruptly, startlingly, the front-door bell rang, and simultaneously a hammering began on the panels. Sam jumped. Then, face white and twitching, he left the study and went down the passage. The tattoo ceased only as he opened the door and found Jones on the step. He was unshaven. The light streaming on his face showed wild eyes and teeth half-bared.

"Where is it?" he grated.

Sam strove to concentrate on the situation. It was difficult. Too vividly he remembered how the compass points had passed *through* the *Heavenly Toy*. He blinked.

"Where's what?"

"My china girl!" You've stolen it! You was there when I went to sleep!"

Sam recalled what had happened. "I put it in your desk."

"You didn't!" Jones forced his way past the door. "I've searched!"

"Not in the right place, then!" Sam objected. "Go back and look again!"

Jones seemed undecided. "But I've *looked*! If I thought you was telling me a lie . . . !" he clenched his fist expressively.

"Why should I tell you a lie?"

"Because you wanted it for yourself!"

Sam felt suddenly irritated. He put his hand on the other's chest, pushing. "Go to hell!" he said, and closed the door.

He locked the door and looked through the front window. Jones was going down the road, hurrying, in such haste that he almost ran. There was something here that did not fit, Sam thought. He himself seemed to possess a measure of defence against the curious power of the *Heavenly Toys*. He admired their appearance; he admitted that they—whatever they were—*looked* attractive and had a queer fascination which he could not explain. But his feelings did not reach the intensity of those shown by Ruth—or by Jones, who had been fighting mad. He wondered from what cause his personal immunity arose. To know might be important, one day, he thought. Because of that immunity he was able to adjudge the *Heavenly Toys* with a measure of detachment apparently denied to his less fortunate fellow-men. *They* fell under the curious spell: he did not—*quite* . . . *When* he tried hard enough he *could* resist . . . It was comforting to know that.

He fell to wondering what lay behind the sudden appearance of the *Heavenly Toys*. Something big undoubtedly formed the prime mover. It was no mere sales stunt, but something a thousand times more important and dangerous. And still the objects—whatever they were—came, he thought. Lorries trundled into the city, each piled high. Other branches opened and the stocks were undiminished.

He returned to his study. The outline of his model was only a chimera, he knew now, and created in some unknown manner to delude the eye, and even the touch. So it was with the countless objects scattered in thousands of homes throughout the city, he thought, and a chill sensation of danger came uncalled. *What lay at the heart of each of those thousands of objects*, he asked himself uneasily. *What were they?*

The compass points had become darkened as if thrust into a red-hot fire. He studied the model, but it was impenetrable to his vision. Nothing hinted at what lay within.

There was one way to find out, he decided suddenly. *Force.*

He took out the tools which he had previously abandoned, closed his eyes, and struck a powerful blow with the hammer. It rebounded violently as from rubber. A second attempt was no more successful. Neither blow made any sound, and he put the hammer down.

The situation was beyond him, Sam thought. He fingered his other tools but knew they would be useless. Experimentally he laid his hacksaw across the *Toy*. After half a minute it glowed cherry-red, then slowly cooled. Nothing further happened.

It was time for a drink, Sam thought. Afterwards, he could try to puzzle out a more scientific approach. He went into the dining room, poured out a half tumbler of neat whisky, and drank most of it. He needed it badly, he decided.

He returned to the study, carrying the glass and closing his eyes as he stepped through the door. How could he get apart a model which turned metal tools red-hot—apparently in self-defence, he wondered. There must be a way, if he could discover it. He opened his eyes and focussed them on the desk. The *Heavenly Toy* had gone.

He set his glass down with elaborate care and walked round the desk. The metal-saw lay on the carpet a full three feet from his chair. He had not dropped it there, he knew: he was not so tired as to be mistaken over a thing like that. He knew, too, that no one had come to the study. He had only been away for a few moments and the dining room gave a view of the passage. The window was fastened on the inside and undisturbed.

So perhaps Jones wouldn't find his china girl, if things happened like this, he thought.

By the door something glinted and he picked it up gingerly. A tiny, irregular scrap of metal, it could have been silver, but was as light as a feather. That it had not been there earlier he was willing to swear before ten juries.

Chapter IV.

Russell examined Sam critically, his back to the broad window of his private office. "There may be something in what you say, Tannoy," he admitted.

"Right enough there's something in it!" Sam said. "These *Heavenly Toys* are a parasite on humanity! They have adopted the most innocent form—got themselves taken into tens of thousands of homes—"

"Wait." Russell held up a hand. Lean, gaunt, keenly intellectual, he had never to Sam's knowledge been fooled. Bald crowned, white haired at fifty five, the flying, wispy locks round his head stood out, shining in the strong back light. He scratched a cheek. "You're implying that these things are—*alive*?"

Sam shook his head. "I didn't say so! I only said that their appearance is camouflage—but what it really disguises I don't know!"

"But I've seen them myself," Russell objected. "I've *handled* them—"

"That only means that a tactile effect is produced, as well as an ocular," Sam pointed out. "Or the whole deception, however it's arranged, doesn't depend upon one sense alone—we feel, or think we feel, them, too. I've been puzzling over this a lot, and that's the only explanation! Don't ask me how it's done, I can't tell you—yet. But hidden within each *Heavenly Toy* there's *something*. When we know what that thing is we may know where they came from and why."

Russell nodded slowly. "Their innocent external appearance is only—*a disguise*?"

"In my opinion—yes!" Sam took out the tiny shard of whitish metal and placed it on the desk. "Can you have this analysed? It appears to be an unusual element or alloy. As such, it should be possible to get a line on its likely source."

The other turned the piece between his fingers. "It's from a *Heavenly Toy*?" Vital interest burned in his eyes.

Sam shook his head again. "I didn't say so! I'm not committing myself. All I can say is this—I had a *Heavenly Toy*; when I wasn't watching, it vanished, and *that* was left. It seems worth following up."

Back in his office, Sam relaxed in his chair to study the sheets and clippings scattered on his desk. Much of the normal work of the Russell Syndicate seemed momentarily in abeyance. A quarter of the staff was absent, and the usual flood of incoming news reduced to half its ordinary volume. Reports on the *Heavenly Toys* were few and unsatisfying. There were two good reasons for that, Sam thought. Their coming had been undramatic and lacked news value. And reporters who suspected there *might* be a story had remained cautious. He wondered whether they were right, and he himself wrong and making a fool of himself . . . No he thought, it had been real. Even the unusual quietness of the Syndicate building was proof.

Such reports as there were would have scarcely made up a

paragraph. Factual, brief, they came from scattered localities. One, clipped from an overseas cable report, suggested that the arrival of the *Heavenly Toys* had been more widespread than he had believed. They had simultaneously appeared in scores of cities—possibly in scores of *countries*, Sam thought. If so, news of their coming would only filter through slowly. They lacked the drama necessary to bring them under the heading of international news. Reporters and sub-editors would hesitate—and say nothing.

Sam went to the ground-floor, and out. The mid-day traffic was there—but a little thin. He watched it morosely, wondering how many blue-painted lorries had come into the city since dawn, and what was behind it all.

“You’re Mr. Tannoy—”

A hand touched his arm and he turned, meeting friendly eyes in a face he recognised. The young man smiled fleetingly.

“Linda told me you worked here. I was coming in.”

Sam sighed. “You’d be welcome, but I was going home. What was it?”

“I wondered if you knew where Linda is.”

Sam started, wondering, too, at the odd note in Paul’s voice. He had liked him the first time they had met, and liked him now.

“Linda? She’s at work—or home.”

Paul Hardniss shook his head determinedly. “That’s just it—she isn’t!” He looked confused. “We were slack and I took time off to look her up. When I had no luck I thought she must have gone home—”

“So she has!” Sam declared. He wondered whether it was actually as simple as that. “Perhaps they were slack, too.”

“But she wasn’t there! Your wife said so, Mr. Tannoy—”

Their eyes met and Sam read a dismay equal to his own in those fixed so eagerly on him. The noise of the street seemed far away. He took the other’s arm, guiding him down the side-alley of the Syndicate building.

“Drop the Mr. business,” he said. “Sam’s the name. It seems we’re in this together. Let’s talk as we ride.”

He backed the saloon from the garage space and turned up the alley and into the street. “How long since you were at my place, Paul?” he asked.

“A half hour, I’d say.”

“Then perhaps you just missed Linda.” He waited for lights to change. “She could have been on the way.”

“Scarcely—they said she’d left work an hour before.”

So it wasn’t so simple, Sam thought. He took the saloon

across into traffic and saw that he was tailing a blue lorry. "You've heard of the *Heavenly Toys*?" he asked.

Paul looked sideways at him, face morose. "Who hasn't! They appear from nowhere—break things up so that I can't see where it will end—"

"That's exactly it!" Sam declared. "They didn't appear from *nowhere*! There's a reason—if we can find it."

"What reason? It can't pay."

Sam thought of the piece of metal. Russell would know where to obtain an analysis which would be both full and exact.

"We could follow this lorry," Paul said suddenly.

Sam looked at him quickly. "And Linda?"

"You could ring home. If she's there, all right. If not, we can start enquiries. That's all we could do anyway."

There was a lot in that, Sam thought. He eased out of the traffic. The blue lorry went from sight. "No need to tail it," Sam said. "I know where it's going. That means I can ring home now."

A box was near the corner. He began to wonder whether no one was at home, or whether they would not bother to answer. Then the earpiece became alive. "Hullo."

"Linda!" Sam said. "It *is* you?"

"Oh, dad. Yes, this is Linda..."

"You sound half asleep," he said.

There was no reply. He pictured her standing in their hall with the phone in her hand, and knew that something was *wrong*. She had never spoken like this before; was usually vividly alive, full of the enthusiasm of nineteen . . .

"You all right?" he asked.

There was a delay as if she was thinking of other things—or giving her attention to something else which occupied it, he thought uneasily.

"*Linda!*" he said.

There was a pause then: "We're all right. Why?"

He did not feel relieved. "Ruth and Richard there?"

Again delay, then: "Yes."

Yes, he thought. No chatter; no eager questions. The speaker at the other end might have been a mere shadow of Linda!

"I shan't be in until late," he said.

There seemed nothing more; he could not even be sure that she had heard, or understood. The line went dead and he hung up. He left the box, his face set. Apparently Linda had found

her *Heavenly Toy*. He wondered what could be done. Richard had kicked him; Ruth had been ready to fight tooth and nail... It was not simply a case of going back and throwing the *Heavenly Toys* out of the house. Heaven help us, Sam thought. He felt that he was only just beginning to realise fully how serious matters were....

He turned the saloon on to the road east out of the city and accelerated. The suburbs slipped away behind. Sun shone on the road and the air was warm and pleasant. Superficially, everything was so absolutely normal, Sam thought. But in his own mind was an undercurrent of unease, sharply increasing as he remembered Linda's words and the tonelessness of her voice.

"It's only about twenty miles out," he said.

Paul had been sitting motionless with an odd expression. He looked at Sam. "What kind of a place is it?"

"Ordinary enough. Moderately large, but all store-rooms. That's the queer part. It's not a factory—there's no manufacturing plant. Yet obviously the goods they truck out must come from somewhere, though I never saw any arrive."

"Perhaps there was an interval in the arrival of consignments."

Sam pursed his lips. "I doubt it." The store had been equally full at his second visit. He would swear that on oath.

They stopped on the slope with the *Heavenly Toy Co.* spread out below. Sam sat with his hands on the wheel, looking down at the compact set of buildings. He was beginning to feel that they were only a tiny part of some huge plan. A hazy suspicion of what the plan might be lurked on the edge of his mind, but its exact purpose, and the identity of its originators, were alike mysteries.

"It looks ordinary enough," Paul said flatly.

That was all part of the plan, Sam thought. Quietly—almost secretly—the *Heavenly Toys* had arrived and been scattered through the length and breadth of the country.

"The *Toys* are not ordinary," he pointed out, "nor is the manner of their coming. This time I'm not leaving until I've learned something!"

"You think we can make him talk?"

"Kedrick? I'm not sure. There may be other ways. Again, his position may be unimportant. It's the people behind him and what's backing them that we must discover."

Sam locked the saloon and went down into the valley on foot. Workmen were busy along one boundary of the site. High con-

crete posts were being erected and ten-foot wire netting strained between them.

"Looks as if they're planning to keep trespassers out," Paul Hardniss said.

Sam did not halt. "Any business concern might do the same."

He wondered why he always tried to make things appear normal—always searched for the rational, *ordinary* explanation. But it would obviously be several days before the fencing was completed.

They observed the buildings from a distance until late afternoon, and Sam felt confident that he could find his way around them without danger when darkness came. Steady activity continued, but no loads of any kind arrived. Towards evening most of the workmen left and the main gates were closed.

"Looks quiet enough," Sam decided. "I'm going to phone Russell."

He found the box which he had used before, and Russell answered almost as promptly as if he had been waiting for the call.

"I'm watching the *Heavenly Toy Co.* with a friend," Sam said guardedly. "Heard anything about the metal analysis?"

"No—but plenty of hints!" Russell sounded excited. "I had it sent up-town to a specialist, but he wouldn't touch it. He's getting another analyst in—a top-flight government man. I'm expecting the report through any minute."

"But it should have been a simple routine job!" Sam objected.

"Could be. Could be not. All depends upon *what it is they've got to analyse!*"

So that was the way things had turned, Sam thought. "Look," he said, "I'll ring you again later. I've nothing to report. We plan to stay here for some hours—perhaps all night. Will you leave someone to watch your phone?"

"Can do." Russell rang off.

Outside, Sam wondered what this meant. Paul came from the direction of the main gates.

"I drifted along to talk to some of the men," he said.

Sam looked at him sharply. A note of excitement was in his voice too. Less than in Russell's, but there.

"Learn anything?"

"They seem to have been wondering. The store-rooms are always full, every morning. But none of them ever seemed to be

about when consignments *arrive*. They didn't think much about it at first, but got together, later, and became curious. The whole thing seems a mystery."

This almost proved what he had suspected, Sam thought. Loads were taken away; none arrived. It was queer.

"Here's the gate-keeper," Paul said abruptly.

An old man came across the road. Wizen, in blue overalls, his eyes were nevertheless bright.

"Hi," Sam said, "we've been talking about you."

The quick, bright eyes flickered over them. "I've got a good job," he spat. "Why should I wonder?"

"But you do," Sam prompted. "You do. You wonder how men are always taking goods away and never bringing any."

"Maybe." The other looked cautious. "But it's a good job—short hours and good pay. Why should I worry? And I gather the boss don't like us to wonder on things which don't concern us."

Sam grinned. "Fair enough. But we'd like to know one thing. It wouldn't go farther. How does the stuff arrive?"

The gate-keeper examined them, seemed about to say something, hesitated, looked suddenly suspicious, and turned away.

"It's magic," he said over his shoulder.

They watched him go and Sam snorted. "By this time tomorrow we'll know!" he declared.

When darkness came they went round the unfinished fence. Except for one office window the buildings were not illuminated and Sam led the way to the back of one of the stores rooms whose position he had noted. It was silent, and locked, as he had expected, but windows stretched the full length of the building. A lorry parked for the night close against the wall should enable them to see inside, he judged. Weak moonlight shone on the face of the building, very dimly filtering in to show many rows of storage shelves. Standing on tip-toe on the lorry bed, Sam saw that the shelves were half empty, and he exhaled his breath in a hiss of triumph.

"Sometime before dawn those places will be filled!" he whispered. "How?"

They were silent, watching. Patchy cloud occasionally obscured the moon and the position was uncomfortable.

"We'll watch in turn," Sam decided at length. "It's a long time until morning."

Paul murmured agreement. "I'm ready to begin."

Sam got down stiffly from the lorry and began to circle the

building silently. The large doors at one end were padlocked. The other side of the building almost abutted on a second store and the wall was quite featureless. The farther end had a window only, too high to be reached. Sam stood with his back to the brickwork, wondering what had caused the unusual excitement in Russell's voice. He wondered too, about Linda. Unusual strain had been manifest in her words, not mere disinterestedness. There had been a subtle undercurrent—a mysterious *something*—which he could not dismiss from mind. Memory of it lingered worryingly. Perhaps Paul could help to remove it, he thought. Certainly he was the type he would like to know Linda better.

He went round some of the other buildings and back towards the solitary lorry. The light still burned in the office, but the curtained window gave no view of the interior. The moon came into view again. Paul was beckoning frantically, yet apparently cautioning silence. Sam vaulted on to the lorry, stretching up to bring his eyes above the sill of the high window.

In the shadowy obscurity of the store a faint pink ring glowed. It stood vertically near the centre of the floor, and Sam judged he could have passed through it, by stooping, had he been inside. Very slowly it became more distinct, shimmering like burning fire, until it was a circle brilliant and true as the cipher of a neon sign. But it was no red neon tube, Sam thought. It had materialised as from nowhere and appeared to maintain itself by some means at which he could not even guess. He heard a muttered exclamation from Paul, and felt fingers digging into his arm.

"There's something—*coming*—"

Dark shadows began to obscure the pink ring. Sam strained to pierce the dimness of the store, lit only by faint moonlight and red reflections from the glowing circle. Objects were coming through the ring, moving quickly one after the other almost as if carried on a conveyor belt. But there was no belt, Sam was sure. Nor was there anything to show how the dark, uniform objects moved.

"They're *Heavenly Toys*!" Paul hissed.

Sam felt amazement, incredulity—then conviction. Despite the gloom, the outlines of the objects could be discerned. The uniformity of general size had been deceiving, at first, he decided. But they were unmistakeable, now. Sometimes a glimpse of brilliant colour was visible; occasionally he could distinguish what the toys were.

"It—it's teleportation!" Paul stated in a low voice.

Sam said nothing. The stream of objects through the pink ring continued. He wondered whether that ring was the end of some extra-spatial tube, or the outlet of some unknown apparatus which materialised the passing objects into their dimension. He did not know. Only the ring was visible. Behind it the shelves could be seen, yet the *Heavenly Toys* still came.

Only after a long time did the stream cease. The pink ring faded slowly in brilliance and snuffed out. Sam found himself to be cramped and stiff, and he got down off the lorry awkwardly.

"That beats everything!" he said. "I'm going to make that call. If Russell has nothing for me, I've news for *him*!"

He went to the box. The reply was so quick that Russell might have been fuming at his desk, his hand almost on the phone.

Sam could not help feeling surprise. "You 'not gone home yet, Mr. Russell!"

"No, Tannoy! And *listen*!" Sam had never heard Russell's voice so sharp. "I've heard about that sample! Where did you get it, Tannoy? *Where did you get it?*"

Sam felt irritated. It should have been his boss who was *listening*, he thought. "Off my study floor, I told you!"

"You thought it was part of a *Heavenly Toy*?"

"I didnt say so!"

Russell made an unintelligible sound. "You implied it!"

"Possibly," Sam admitted quietly. "I said that the *Toy* had gone and that was left. You know your rule—nothing is considered a fact until it's proved! You've got a reputation for accuracy to maintain, you said. I can remember your telling me—!"

"Forget it." Russell was suddenly quiet. "I've had the analysis—or the analysts' report, I should say. They couldn't analyse that sample, Tannoy. First, their normal tests failed. Then the specialist I mentioned failed, too. But he gave a reason for his failure."

There was silence. Sam deliberately relaxed his grip on the phone and swallowed to relieve the dryness of his throat.

"What was that reason? he asked.

"It is *alien*. The molecular structure is *non-earthly*. It was not—could not—be manufactured on this planet. Or in this solar system, for all we can tell! It is, to quote the expert's words, an alien isotope of other-worldly origin."

"I see," Sam said weakly.

"You don't, Tannoy!" Russell declared. "There are other things! I want to know exactly how this metal came into your

study—what you did, or what happened! Whether you can get any more, for the analysts to work on! How it came about that *you* had it, and not any other of the ten thousand people who have *Heavenly Toys*—”

Sam returned the receiver to its rest. Outside, he stood with his back to the door, letting the cool night air play on his face.

So the *Heavenly Toys* are of non-earthly origin, he thought. He turned his gaze upwards. A myriad stars twinkled in the sky. Familiar constellations in familiar groupings, he thought. Yet how very little about them anyone on Earth knew!

Chapter V.

“But I tell you I didn’t take your china girl,” Sam repeated patiently.

The outer offices of the Syndicate building were more silent than he had ever known them and he thought with annoyance that if things had been normal Jones would never have gained admittance. Jones had let himself in; had closed the door, and stood with his big hands spread on the desk, leaning forwards aggressively.

“Nobody but you came in!” he stated truculently.

Sam sighed. “I’ve got worries enough without arguing with a blockhead! I had a late night and have work to do.”

Jones looked stubborn. “She’s gone!” he repeated. “Who took her if you didn’t! Nobody else been there that I know!”

Sam wondered whether he should try to explain how his own *Heavenly Toy* had vanished. It would be little use, he decided. Jones was in no mood to believe him.

Jones put a fist under Sam’s nose. “You’ll be sorry!” he declared passionately. “Burglary, that’s what it is! I shan’t stand for it—”

His eyes flashed and he clenched his teeth. Sam got up and went round the desk. “Suppose we go back to your place and look,” he suggested.

Jones looked undecided. He scowled, biting his lips, and a new thought occurred to Sam. Jones was desperately anxious to recover his *Heavenly Toy*. He was under its fascination, passionately regretted its loss, and was ready to do anything—perhaps even murder—to regain it. Sam wondered why only he himself was partly immune. Other people were not, and the situation was tricky. He put a hand on Jones’s shoulder.

"Look," he said, "fighting will get us nowhere. And if I'd wanted one of these things I could have bought one."

"Maybe," Jones admitted.

Sam felt that he had gained a point. "Come to think of it, why don't you buy another, if you feel like that—"

"I don't want another!" Jones declared fiercely. The red anger was coming back into his eyes. "I want this one!"

"Why?"

Jones looked momentarily uncomfortable. A puzzled expression crossed his face. He bit his lips. "You're trying to stall me off!" he said at last.

So Jones didn't know, Sam thought. Jones wanted his own *Heavenly Toy* back. Another would not do, now. Sam shrugged. It seemed useless to argue.

"Let's go to your place," he suggested.

Jones's passionate resentment at his loss could become dangerous, he decided. That was how the *Heavenly Toys* made people feel. Why, and how it was done, remained to be uncovered. That there was a reason, still hidden was certain. And that of *alien* origin, Sam thought as he left the Syndicate building.

Jones pushed open the door leading into the dusty room. Drawers were pulled out, their contents littered the floor. Sam's gaze went to the desk. That, too, had clearly been searched thoroughly. An object the fraction of the size of the statuette would have been found.

"I have been through everything," Jones stated. Sam noted that his aggressiveness was changing to fatigue. He looked as if he had not slept for many days.

"What you had wasn't a china model at all," Sam said abruptly. "It *looked* like one, that's all. The outline was there—the appearance—even something you could *feel*. But it wasn't china, or any other substance we know of; there wasn't simply nothing inside. There was..." He stopped. He did not know what was *inside*, yet, he realised. He only *suspected*. The external appearance of the *Toys* was a deception. That deception was being practised by aliens. *Where were those aliens?* How had they contrived to study mankind, formulating this plan to get, unsuspected, into uncounted homes? The question nagged.

He saw that the other had not tried to follow his explanation. Instead, he was once more turning over the piles of litter, on his knees by the desk.

Watching him, Sam wondered yet again what the *Toys* were. He wondered whether there would come a time when their ex-

ternal appearance, so deliberately, childishly innocent, would change, so that humanity could see their true form. He felt uneasy and Russell's words rang continuously in his mind. *Alien*, he thought. *From another world. Why?*

"Didn't notice this before," Jones said suddenly.

He sat back on his heels indicating the open drawer, pulled out upon the floor. At one spot the bottom was charred, the wood burned half through. Sam leaned over and saw that the blackened area occupied the position where he had placed the *Heavenly Toy*.

"You—you must have had something on fire, here," he said.

Jones shook his head violently. "It wasn't like that before." The conviction in his voice was undeniable.

Sam wondered how the heat had been generated. Normally there was no sensation of the slightest warmth even when holding the *Heavenly Toys*. He straightened abruptly.

"It isn't here!" he declared. "That's clear. But I'd like you to come with me."

"Why?" Jones appeared deflated by his failure. His eyes sought wildly round his dingy apartment. Tears stood in them—whether from lack of sleep or bitter disappointment, Sam could not decide. "I—I've got to find it, Mr. Tannoy," he said flatly.

They went out. "I had a *Toy*, too, but it vanished," Sam said as they reached the street. "I told you. If what I suspect happened at home, too, then I'm getting some of Russell's experts on the job! We need specialists—the best we can find! This thing is getting too big, too complex, for one brain."

Jones followed silently, his face pale, almost blank as that of a sleepwalker. Looking at him, Sam felt pity. Illogical as it was, Jones's spirit seemed broken by his loss!

Home, Sam let himself into his study. Jones stood inside the door, watching him, and Sam began to search the floor once again. A quick glance showed that what he sought was not on his desk, and he bent low, studying the carpet. It was brown, with an irregular, darker pattern. By the door, almost under Jones's feet, was a charred patch. Sam sat on his heels, trying to recall any incident which could have caused it. There was none. He stood up.

"Exactly like the burn at the bottom of your drawer!" he said, pointing.

Jones looked down. "So what?" His pugnacity seemed to be returning.

Sam sat on his desk. "It helps to prove something, even if

not explaining it. We each had a *Heavenly Toy*. Both vanished. In each case a burnt mark remained."

That might convince Jones, he hoped. But it left many questions unanswered. How had his *Toy* moved itself from his desk to a position near the door? What had happened to it? Was it a *retreat*, because the *Toy* had been roughly handled? If so, the *Toys* were either alive, or very efficient robots. The act of retreating from danger proved some kind of intelligence was present... Sam pondered. There seemed no logical reason why mechanical or robot objects should be infiltrated into uncounted homes. He did not like the result of his deductions, and slipped to his feet.

"Come with me," he said.

The downstairs rooms were empty. He beckoned and they went up to the landing. Richard was curled up on his bed, fully dressed, his tangled hair burrowed into a crumpled pillow and his clothing untidy. Ruth half lay in an easy chair, a cushion under her head, her face towards the door and her eyes closed. Both were asleep, their cheeks pallid except for high patches of colour.

Sam closed the door and faced Jones. "Civilisation goes to pot while folk gloat over their *Heavenly Toys*! Why? Tell me that! What's their fascination? Why do people stare at them until they're dead tired? Why do children stay away from play and school, women forget their housework, and men forget they've jobs to do? *Why?*"

Jones gazed at him, blinking rapidly. "I—I don't know."

"Why did you give up work?" Sam pressed.

"I—I was fagged out."

Sam shook his head with conviction. "That's not the whole story!"

"No," Jones admitted slowly. He scratched the top of his head. "I didn't want to go—I wanted to stay home. I always intended to start work again, but always put it off—"

"You stayed home because you wanted to be with your *Heavenly Toy*!" Sam accused.

"Perhaps I did!" Jones flushed, then scowled. "But I don't see what business it is of yours."

"Everything to do with the *Heavenly Toys* is my business!" Sam stated. "I've made it my business—and it stays that until this thing is finished, one way or the other!"

They went downstairs. Linda was out and Sam hoped that she had managed to break away from the danger that he was sure threatened everyone who was captivated by a *Heavenly Toy*. She

might be with Paul, he thought. Paul could surely claim to have a strong measure of counter-attraction. He hoped so.

Jones hesitated at the door and Sam pressed his shoulder. "Go back and get some rest—you need it."

Alone, he went slowly back to the foot of the stairs. No sound came from above. He gnawed his lower lip, ears intent, and wondered whether he should take the opportunity to pitch the *Heavenly Toys* out of the house . . . *Not yet*, he decided at last. The reactions which had arisen from his previous attempts in that direction had been too violent. He did not want Richard and Ruth at his throat, murder in their eyes.

He rang the Syndicate building and got Russell. "I've got ideas, but not the specialised knowledge to carry them through, Mr. Russell," he said. "We need real specialists."

"Can get them."

"Good." Sam wondered exactly what the specialists would be up against. "The sooner we begin the better."

"They're almost on their way." Russell paused. "There's been a young man here asking for you. Gave the name of Paul Hardniss. Said you know him."

"I do. How long ago?"

"Five minutes."

Sam frowned, remembering there were only two upstairs. "Was my daughter with him?"

Came a delay and he heard Russell speaking into a desk communicator. Then the voice came clear on his own line. "He was alone."

That was not the answer he had wanted, Sam thought. "You sure?"

"Quite. Anything depend on it?"

Sam sighed, relaxing his tensioned nerves. "No—no, it was nothing important. Just wondered, that's all."

He rang off and stood in the silent hall wondering where Linda was, alone. Not at work, at this hour, he thought.

A shadow came across the frosted glass of the door and an arm rose towards the bell-push. Sam opened the door.

"You haven't been long on your way," he said.

Paul came into the passage. "You weren't at the office."

"No. I went up-town with a man." Sam closed the door.

Comprehension came into the other's eyes. "So that's why you weren't here when I rang," he said. "Linda answered. That's why I came after you."

Sam felt sudden unease. "Why?"

"I didn't think much of this idea of hers—or of what I could gather of it. Seemed a bit too risky; not the right way to set about it at all—"

Sam knew there had been cause for his uneasiness. "She's not here," he said thinly. "Knowing that, and knowing that I haven't seen her, either, may help you to talk in something less like riddles!"

Consternation came to Paul's face. "Then you don't know—?"

"I've just told you I don't!"

Paul Hardniss whistled. "So I'm too late! or am I—Linda has brains—"

"More than some," Sam agreed with deadly calm. "I'm beginning to think she has you outclassed."

The other started; then a grin flitted over his face, passing. "Sorry, I forgot you didn't know. Briefly, when I rang to speak to you she answered instead. I can't go into all she said. In short, she thinks the *Heavenly Toys* are a menace—"

"We're likely to agree on that, at least," Sam said.

Paul nodded. "She thinks they should be stopped. She said she'd stop them herself, as no one else seemed to be doing anything—"

"Haven't we tried our damndest?" Sam pointed out.

"So I began to tell her, but she rang off."

They stared at each other. *So that was why there were only two upstairs*, Sam thought. He jerked his head to indicate the nearby room and poured out drinks. He set his empty glass down.

"Anything else?"

"She said she intended to find out more about them."

"That all?"

Paul nodded helplessly. "Not another word to go on."

Sam considered, pacing round the room. He went into the passage, listened, and returned.

"Why were you ringing me in the first place, Paul?"

"To say I'm on your side to the end. Seems to me we must do two things—discover the origin of the *Toys*, and find out exactly what they do—"

"So I decided just before you came," he said.

"We must discover who's behind Kedrick—get right back to the prime mover. Somebody must be at the back of it."

Sam let the error pass: the real originators were not *human*. But probably there were men who knew more than Kedrick did, he thought. Kedrick was like Jones—a tool.

"There are *three* things," Sam said abruptly. "You've mentioned two. The third is—how to stop them!"

The phone rang and took him into the passage. Russell's voice came immediately:

"I've got those specialists, Tannoy. Two men who should know all the answers."

"Thanks," Sam said.

He wondered whether it would be as easy as that. The arrival of the *Heavenly Toys* had been carefully planned. The very guise chosen had been masterly, arranged to disarm suspicion. Much had been done in little time; the enemy already occupied thousands of homes. He tried to picture other cities and other countries. If such hints as had arrived at the Syndicate building were correct, then the coming of the *Heavenly Toy* was no mere localised affair.

"Their names are Cavendish and Gaber," Russell said. "Cavendish is dry but brainy. Gaber is foreign."

"Oh, thanks." Sam realised he had forgotten the phone in his hand. "I'll be along," he said.

He hung up. Somewhere in the house a clock chimed musically and he sighed. A week before, at this hour, he had not cause to forget that it was his half-day! Linda, Ruth and Richard had been about, their voices cheery. He had not even known such things as *Heavenly Toys* existed, or met Paul... His gaze rested on him.

"You'd better come too," he said.

Chapter VI.

"Probably a heating effect due to induced currents," Gaber stated.

"Undoubtedly," Cavendish agreed.

Sam examined the pair critically. At first sight he had wondered whether Russell had unearthed the originals employed by some comic-strip cartoon artist. Cavendish was tall and thin, in a striped jacket. His face was long and narrow, his hair grey and his shoulders stooped from long hours of study. Gaber scarcely came up to his shoulder, but his girth more than compensated for his lack of stature. His black hair shone. Passing him in the street, Sam would have assumed him to be a successful Italian ice-cream seller.

"What these two don't know needn't bother us," Russell had declared. Sam began to feel those words were true.

Gaber put a thick hand on his stomach, a thumb through a button-hole of his coat. "You hadn't actually sawn into the *Toy*?" he asked.

Sam shook his head resolutely. "I was holding the blade across it like you do before beginning to saw. It wasn't friction—the heat was too sudden and intense."

"High-frequency radiations must have a source," Cavendish observed dryly.

Gaber tattooed on his stomach with his free fingers. "Such a source could be present in the object itself. Granted that, and *awareness*, the action could have been defensive. Or the heating effect might have been incidental, merely arising because of the presence of radiations produced for another purpose. An alternating field always induces eddy currents in a solid object nearby. If the eddy currents are strong enough the object heats up. Whether such radiations are present can only be determined by experiment."

"Obviously," Cavendish agreed.

He unwound his legs and rose. Gaber put on his grey felt hat and wobbled into motion with a grunt, as if the energy required to overcome his physical inertia was great. Sam caught Paul's eye. Paul had been silent, listening keenly but offering no comment.

"We go too, Paul."

Cavendish and Gaber looked back from the door. "There's room in the saloon which brought us," Gaber said. We'll pick up a new *Heavenly Toy* on the way."

Cavendish inclined his head. "A sound plan."

A chauffeur opened the doors respectfully and they glided away from the Syndicate building and joined the traffic going south. "It's Cavendish's car," Russell had whispered as they left, "not a hired taxi." That meant there was more money in scientific investigation than in newspaper work, Sam thought. Much more, too, than being a young medico in a local hospital, judging by the way in which Paul always used city transport. Gaber occupied a front seat; he looked round, only his eyes showing above its back.

"If these—*objects* induce such powerful eddy currents in metal objects nearby we may experience some difficulty in discovering what they contain."

Cavendish, stretched out in the corner near Sam, nodded "Obviously."

Gaber bounced in his seat, getting a forearm up along its back. "There are many interesting possibilities. Apparently each must have its own source of energy."

"So I had assumed," Cavendish said.

Gaber's round eyes settled on Sam. "Unless, of course there has been some error—"

"There's been none." Sam looked out of the window. Ahead was a blue facade. "We won't argue," he said. "You can see for yourself."

He got out while the saloon waited and joined the people outside the store. Two women were in front of him, talking. "My friend next door said her boy was real taken with it," one said. The other nodded. "I've heard they're so cheap, too." The first moved into the doorway. "So they are, dearie, and that's something, these days."

That was how the fame of the *Heavenly Toys* would spread, Sam thought. The whisper of alarm would only come much later—perhaps too late... Yet if he stopped these two, telling them to go home instead, they would think him crazy.

At length he got into the shop and purchased the first *Heavenly Toy* which came to hand. Its outline was that of a model fort, but he knew that appearances lied. Beneath that innocuous exterior chosen to disarm by its very innocence, lurked *something*

He re-entered the saloon and dropped the package on Cavendish's knees. It's yours," he said. "I don't want it to belong to me."

Gaber looked back at him as the vehicle rolled away through the traffic. "You sound as if you're afraid of it, Mr. Tannoy," he said pointedly.

Sam watched the lights ahead at red. "Perhaps I am. Perhaps I simply don't want to grow attached to it—people do, you know."

Gaber's head jerked as they started forward again. "You mean that in some way unknown these objects arouse a—*compulsion* in their owners?"

"Briefly."

"Yet you tried to damage yours."

"I did," Sam agreed pensively. "But that doesn't mean other folk feel the same, or could try to do what I did. I seem to have a degree of immunity. I realise their attraction, yet never felt quite the same way about a *Toy* as others do. I should never be on the point of murder because somebody stole my *Toy*." He thought of Jones, haggard and bitterly resentful of his loss. "I'm glad I don't feel it so deeply."

"We must investigate the cause of your immunity," Gaber suggested.

Cavendish moved the package on his knees. "A sound idea."

They reached the edge of the city and a high, white building of modern design. At a side wing they got out.

"The electronics section is on the top floor," Gaber said.

They went along a corridor to a lift and rose smoothly. Cavendish held the parcel carefully, standing a little apart, and followed them slowly when the lift doors opened. Inside a nearby room long tables were littered with apparatus of all kinds, glinting under frosted daylight tubes. Gaber flung off his coat and put on a white smock with big pockets; the heaviness went from his step and a new liveliness came to his eyes and face.

"Radiation tests first," he said.

Cavendish was silent. Sam thought he put the wrapped fort on the bench with some reluctance, and looked at him quickly. But the lean face betrayed nothing.

"After the tests we can try—other means," Gaber said meaningly.

Cavendish drew in his cheeks. "We must not damage it unnecessarily, Gaber."

Sam felt a momentary shock, but dismissed it. He bit a lip, hesitated, then asked: "Have you a *Heavenly Toy* of your own, Professor Cavendish?"

Two curious eyes settled on him. "Certainly not, young man!"

Paul touched Sam's arm. "Let's get on with the tests," he suggested quietly. "I'm wondering where Linda is."

They unwrapped the model and Cavendish's brows rose high. "Ah, so *that* is a *Heavenly Toy*!" he said.

Sam noticed the admiration in his voice. Gaber set up an apparatus with dials and a cathode-ray tube screen and placed a small inductive loop near the model. He switched on humming and puffing his cheeks out while the apparatus warmed up. A waveform trace began to play on the tube screen and he drew up a high stool, settling upon it with all his attention centred on the equipment. His fingers moved on the dials; the trace changed its amplitude and shape, oscillating vividly. Watching, Sam saw Gaber's features grow completely still, as with inner tension as he adjusted the apparatus with an infinite lightness of touch. The glowing cathode-ray trace changed time and again as long minutes passed. At last Gaber relaxed perceptibly. His eyes fixed on the model.

"It's radiating on several frequencies. All the radiations are modulated. Some of the modulations are of a constant pattern; others change continually." He turned a knob and a continuously interlacing pattern appeared on the tube face. "See that? It's constant."

Sam watched the weaving line. "Could it be the field which forms the external shell?"

"Perhaps."

Sam examined the *Toy* closely. It shone. At first, he had believed the brightness was due to some glossy, semi-transparent varnish or paint, or because the model was moulded from some brilliant plastic. Now, he saw that it might be only a *field*—a three-dimensional, fully-coloured projection. He remembered how the compass points had passed through. On the other hand, each *Toy* had the *feel* of solidarity.

"There's the irregular waveform," Gaber said.

The trace danced in ever-changing fashion, never repeating itself. Watching it, Sam wondered what they were up against.

"It resembles a modulated radio signal," Gaber said.

Sam started, the full significance only slowly dawning. Gaber met his eyes, nodding slowly.

"If so, I can see only one possible purpose for it—as a means of communication."

Paul Hardniss released his breath suddenly. "You mean it —*it's keeping in touch with its fellows!*"

"That seems possible."

Sam licked his lips, watching the vivid trace. It seemed, he thought, that something *living* was concealed within the model, and maintaining contact with the entities who had hidden themselves in the other *Heavenly Toys*. An idea occurred to him.

"Why don't all these radiations cause interference to the usual radio programmes—or to television?"

"Because of their frequency. They're below the wavelength ever used for ordinary purposes—way down below the microwave band. There's not likely to be any apparatus outside a laboratory which could detect them."

Gaber switched off the apparatus and pushed back his stool. His chin almost on his chest, he stared at the *Toy*, tattooing on his stomach with his fingers.

"Now to discover what's inside it," he said. "We might use non-metallic tools. Being non-conductive, no eddy currents could arise in them to cause heating. Or we might employ a few inductive techniques of our own—"

"I don't think we should harm it unnecessarily, Gaber."

Sam jumped as Cavendish spoke for the first time since the tests had begun. Cavendish's aquiline face was slightly pale, his lips snapped shut.

"But that's why we brought it here!" Gaber objected.

Cavendish shook his head. "Mere violence seems totally unjustified."

Gaber ejaculated a word which Sam assumed had a meaning in his native language. "Can you suggest how we may discover what it is *without* some form of violence...?"

Faint colour came to Cavendish's lean cheeks. "As senior technician here, I forbid you to use violence!"

Gaber snorted. "I'm a specialist in radiation physics—you never were *my* superior!"

"I'm senior throughout the laboratories on this floor!"

"And the radiation wing is strictly away on the east side of the building, one floor lower!" Gaber declared. "I can take it there!"

"I forbid it! I will not have equipment or samples removed from my laboratories!"

Sam jerked his head at Paul. "Let's get out of here! We can check up on their findings later—if they haven't strangled each other!"

Thirty minutes later they dismissed the taxi and Sam got out his saloon. It's time Kedrick talked!" he said. "What's more, if Linda is following some line of her own it probably took her to the *Heavenly Toy Co.*"

He stopped outside the offices and led the way in. A girl occupied the outer office and she looked up from her desk.

"I want to see Mr. Kedrick," Sam said.

"Have you an appointment?"

Visits like this don't need appointments, Sam thought. But he nodded. "Of course."

She drew out a large reference diary. "Just let me check."

Her head bent over the pages and Sam moved to the inner door, beyond which was Kedrick's office. The girl looked up quickly, startled.

"We're on our way," Sam said.

He opened the door quickly and passed through, Paul following. Kedrick was relaxed in his chair; on the desk before him stood a Chinese statuette. At first glance it seemed to be a mere figure of gleaming porcelain, delicately coloured. Sam knew that it was something very different. He closed the door.

"So you've found your *Heavenly Toy*, Kedrick," he said. Kedrick raised his eyes with apparent effort. He scowled.

"It wasn't the girl's fault, Sam stated. "She couldn't keep us out single handed."

Kedrick examined him. His bald head shone; his eyes, magnified by his glasses, held an odd expression. Analysing it, Sam decided it was half of fury, half of fear. Kedrick did not rise, but the chair creaked under his movements as he put a hand on the edge of his desk nearby.

"Better not ring for help until you've heard what we say," Sam suggested mildly.

Kedrick shrugged. His gaze returned to the Chinese model, then came back to Sam.

"Very well. Say your piece and get out."

Sam went to the desk, leaning with his hands on it. "Where do you get the *Heavenly Toys*?"

A sneer crossed the other's face. "That's my business!"

"I've made it mine, too," Sam said. "Have you had a girl here—my daughter?"

Kedrick drew in his lips. "There was a young woman—pretty, about nineteen or twenty, I'd say. I sent her away."

"Sounds like Linda," Paul murmured.

Sam did not look round. With a quick movement he drew the statuette away from out of Kedrick's reach. Kedrick bounced in his chair, fury on his face but his cheeks pale.

"Wait!" Sam said. "You wouldn't like anything to happen to your *Heavenly Toy*, eh? You'd hate that! You wouldn't like me to smash it up . . ."

Kedrick was still and sweat shone on his forehead, which was white.

"I don't like men who press buttons," Sam said.

Kedrick put his hands on the top of his desk. His eyes were appealing.

"Don't—don't harm it, Tannoy."

"I'm always careful of things belonging to folk who answer questions."

Kedrick licked his lips. "I—I'll talk," he said.

"Good." Sam drew the figure to the corner of the desk most remote from Kedrick. "We want to know all you know—where these things come from, how it was fixed up in the first place—*everything*."

Kedrick groaned. "The job was offered to me out of the blue. By letter. I was to start things going and hire other salesmen.

It seemed straightforward, though we had no money until sales began. I got instructions to keep a percentage of profits and use my initiative. I was cautious at first, but then saw it was a good thing. The terms attracted me. Instructions said the storerooms would be filled every night, but I never saw any consignments come. I thought it best not to wonder too much—I was making a good profit."

So Kedrick was only another catspaw, Sam thought. Like Jones, but probably contacted by someone who really knew things.

"And the address?" he said.

Kedrick wrote it down. Sam decided that he knew no more. He let himself out and Paul followed.

"Your boss isn't angry with you," he said as he passed through the outer office. "Did the young woman who saw him earlier say anything?"

The girl looked relieved. "No, sir."

They returned to the saloon. Sam bunched himself behind the wheel. "Game for a three hour drive, Paul? It's that to this address." He tapped the slip. "Or prefer to look for Linda here?"

Paul hesitated with a hand on the open door. "I'd like to stay here. Linda may be somewhere around. If so, I want to find her."

Sam smiled. "Hoped you'd say that. I wish you luck—both ways."

He slid in the gears and turned out through the gates. On the open road, he let the saloon gain speed. His tyres thrummed and hedges streamed behind; wind plucked and whistled round the vehicle, only where intersections showed ahead did the speedometer drop below sixty.

Chapter VII.

The house was of moderate size and set back from the road. Sam drove in at the open gateway and up the private carriage-way which ended in a loop before the front door. He stood by the saloon, looking round.

The house was isolated and had apparently been surrounded by well-tended gardens, now becoming a wilderness. Unclipped shrubs and bushes almost hid from view an unmown lawn at one side. The gravel drive was weedy, except where the coming and going of some vehicle had made clean wheel tracks. The tracks led beyond the far end of the house, and he followed them. A garage stood open; in it was a grey limousine. Beyond was a long green-

house where dead plants rose shrivelled and brown from scores of pots.

He returned to the main door and pealed the old-fashioned bell. No one came. He rang again, waited, then went along the drive in the other direction.

A narrow path led by the lawn and round to the back of the house. Here, the silence was unbroken. A window was uncurtained and Sam looked in. A bare room was visible, dusty and unoccupied. He pursed his lips and went along until he reached the rear end of the greenhouse. He halted decided he would hammer on the back door, and turned to go back the way he had come

An odd metal structure stood in the garden, visible from where he was. Behind tall yews, it slightly resembled a radio mast, he thought. But there the similarity ended. He frowned, pushing aside the boughs which fringed a narrow path.

The structure was almost as tall as the house and stood on three legs, each terminating in a round insulator which rested in a cup sunk level with the ground. The three legs met several feet above his head, forming a base for the single mast of lattice girders which he had first seen. At the junction of legs and mast was a dull sphere which he judged to be at least ten feet in diameter.

From the concealment of the narrow path he listened. A faint humming seemed to come from the mast, but he could not be sure whether it was caused by the wind that rustled through the trees. The structure itself was almost colourless metal: possibly the same as the piece he had found on his study floor, he thought. Again, possibly not.

He withdrew down the path and listened. The house was silent. He crossed to the back door and noticed that it was unfastened. Pushing it slightly open, he listened intently.

The house was so still it could have been empty. The presence of the limousine in the open garage did not bear out that assumption, Sam thought, and he went in slowly. Stale bread and the remains of a meal were on the table. The door beyond was wide, showing the wall of a dim passage.

At the end of the passage, at the foot of carpeted stairs, a man was crumpled. Elderly, so slight that his arms and legs seemed mere bones in his grey suit, he was dead. Had been dead at least twenty-four hours, Sam decided, not touching him. There was no sign of any weapon, or of violence, or anything to indicate the cause of death.

Too late, now, to do anything for him, Sam thought.

He went upstairs and looked into the rooms. Two were

know your author...

F. G. RAYER'S story "THOU PASTURE US" is one which he has had in mind for a long time and he is always interested in conjecturing on the nature of possible alien life-forms. His science-fiction stories have been published in England, America, and Australia, but this is a new story hitherto not previously published. His longest S.F. story, entitled "TOMORROW SOMETIMES COMES" and published last year by HOME & VAN THAL, has received a great deal of praise, including that of OLAF STAPLEDON, whose classic "LAST AND FIRST MEN" F. G. RAYER regards as one of the most advanced and finest S.F. novels ever to be produced. "TOMORROW SOMETIMES COMES" was based on the conception of an electronic calculating entity which reaches self-awareness, and as a designer of electronic equipment this is the kind of theme with which the author can deal with authority. Future generations will employ equipment now only dimly guessed at. The author's technical writings have appeared in various journals and books, and some technological aspect frequently provides a background for his stories. Man, as a tool-making animal, has no limitations except those of the techniques and materials he employs. He hopes that eventual international understanding will end war, and has a Diploma for fluency in the international language Esperanto. He regards science-fiction readers as among the most far-seeing and quick-minded section of humanity, and thinks that the younger of those living today should have the opportunity of space-flight before they die. Until then, the best thing is to get near to the actual fact as we can—by reading science-fiction!

unused. One was an untidy bedroom. Another appeared to have been some kind of office, and he went in, interested. Indexed files were crammed to overflowing with notes and as Sam leafed through them, he realised that he had reached the last man in the chain that had led from Jones to Kedrick, and from Kedrick to the corpse at the foot of the stairs. From here the first moves in setting up the *Heavenly Toy* stores had been made—the printed note-headings proved that. Thoughtfully he pulled out a particular file. It contained a copy of the first letter to Kedrick, and Kedrick's reply, accepting the terms offered.

It should be possible to trace things even nearer to their source, Sam thought. But the next step would lead to things *not human*.

He searched for almost an hour, but every slip of paper and every note related to business arranged with sales managers like

Kedrick. Nothing hinted where the dead man obtained stores, or—*instructions*

Sam frowned and went thoughtfully along the landing. He would report to Russell, he decided, and let Russell send the authorities for the body

At the top of the stairs he halted, surprise and unease shooting through him. He clutched the banister, staring down. The body had gone.

He descended cautiously, listening often. The house was silent still; only an indentation on the nap of the carpet proved that something had lain there. The passage was shadowy, the remains of the meal unmoved. The garden appeared the same, quiet except for the wind in the boughs. He listened for a long time half within the door, then went out and quickly into the narrow path leading towards the metallic structure. It stood exactly as before, humming either with internal power or with the wind among the tracery of girders. Sam gave it one quick glance. *Time to go*, he thought. *Where there is one dead man there may be two !*

He hurried round the house wondering if his saloon would be there. It was, apparently untouched. He got in quickly and turned on the looped drive. He was out on the road and touching nearly fifty before he knew that something was wrong. It insinuated itself into his mind slowly, at first—a longing to stop. The longing to stop grew, becoming also a longing to stop and look into the back of the car. He swore, braked to a halt, and leaned over his seat.

A *Heavenly Toy* was in the back of the car. It gleamed as with inner light—a miniature replica of a modern building, glossy, superbly proportioned, amazingly beautiful. It *was* beautiful, Sam found himself admitting. Not like Richard's loco, or Ruth's posy. Nor like the *Toys* Jones and Kedrick had had. *They* were quite ordinary, compared with this. This one was *different*. He wanted it to be his own *Heavenly Toy*—all his *own*, for always, to admire and care for He had always wanted a model like that, he thought. He had not realised that, until now Quite suddenly he became aware of a warm feeling under his scalp; his hair prickled, his lips grew dry—

"Damned if I do!" he grated.

Almost with one movement he swept up the *Toy*, opened the door, and flung it out upon the dusty road. He rammed in the gears, jerking forward. He was a mile away before he had re-

covered sufficiently to release his grip on the wheel and mop his face with one hand.

"That's the way they work it!" he said aloud.

He slackened speed to a more safe level, sucking his lips. It had been a near thing, he thought. Very near. He had seen other people taken like that . . . when they and their usefulness to society ceased abruptly. They ceased to fight, too. When a species ceased to fight it was on the way out, Sam thought. Mankind was being taken unawares . . . it was time they *knew*.

Russell passed a hand over his bald crown, then leaned back, his elbows on the chair-arms, fingers in a pyramid. "It would ruin my reputation to publicise a story like that," he said.

Sam leaned forwards. "Don't you see—mankind must be *warned*! People need to know that these *Heavenly Toys* are not the product of any factory on this planet! By keeping silent we're allowing our enemies to consolidate their advantage—"

"And by talking I'd bring such a storm of abuse on my head that the Syndicate would be finished, Tannoy," Russell interrupted.. "I have plenty of rivals ready to jump on me."

"But a reputation strong enough to carry this story round the world!" Sam stated. "Which is more important—the welfare of a few of us, or the survival of the race?"

Russell lowered his eyes; his lids concealed his gaze. He drew in his lips, then sighed. "If people lose confidence in the news I pass they will cease to take it. Result—we cease to reach a large audience and become ineffective. That's why I'm determined to be careful. Making ourselves a laughing-stock with some story which is merely a nine-days wonder won't accomplish anything. We must retain the confidence of our public."

Sam got up. He saw that Russell had expressed his considered opinion, and there was truth in what he said.

"Let me know if anything turns up," Russell said.

Sam nodded and let himself out. He had arrived back at the spot where he had dropped Paul, looked for him without success, then returned home, mentally and physically tired. Ruth had been awake and came down into the kitchen. She was pale, looked ill and tired. He had studied her.

"Where's Richard, Ruth?"

"Asleep."

"Has Linda been in?"

"No, Sam."

She moved from him but he took her arm gently yet firmly. "Don't you think this has gone far enough, Ruth?"

No comprehension of his meaning appeared in her eyes. "I—I've got a headache," she murmured.

"Don't you think you'd be better if you went on as usual? Take a walk. Tidy yourself up . . ."

She put a hand to her hair automatically, her face blank. Sam knew, then, something he had not realised before. When she was admiring the *Heavenly Toy* time almost ceased to exist. Minutes and hours sped by unnoticed. It had been like that the time in his study, he recalled. An hour had passed and he had not known—only Ruth opening the door had awakened him from his daydream. But now her awareness of things seemed to be slipping away; she moved as if half-conscious; spoke like a person still under medical anaesthesia. He cursed the day when he had brought the gift to the house.

He slept soundly, very tired. When he awoke, he satisfied himself that Linda had not come home, then drove to his office.

As he sat once again behind his desk, he wondered what Cavendish and Gaber had discovered. He took up his phone.

"Tannoy again here, Mr. Russell," he said. "I forgot to ask for the analysts' report."

"There's nothing except what you know."

"But I left him with the *Toy*!" Sam objected. "I expected them to find out how it ticks—"

"So did I," Russell declared. "But apparently they had trouble. Cavendish wouldn't let Gaber touch it, nor let him take it away. They had an argument; did nothing."

Sam thought of the fixation that Cavendish had been developing. He remembered how he himself had felt, in the saloon, and shivered. The *Heavenly Toy* in the back had almost accomplished its aim . . .

"I see," he said slowly.

"If anything else comes in, I'll let you know." Russell sounded tired, Sam thought. "Those two may find out something yet. There should be enough for them to find—"

"Thanks."

Sam rang off and wondered what Paul had discovered. He would probably be along to report.

Few enough normal items requiring his attention lay upon his desk, and Sam worked slowly for an hour, then placed the last in the "out" tray. No further general news relating to the *Heavenly Toys* had come in. The slight initial interest appeared to have faded. The *Toys* did not rank as international news.

At length his phone buzzed and he lifted it. "City desk

here," a voice said. A Dr. Gaber wishes to speak to you, I think."

"Put him through!" Sam felt his interest quicken.

There was a pause, then: "Is that Mr. Tannoy, who accompanied us?"

Sam recognised the quiet, cultured tones, and wondered what had happened to Cavendish.

"Tannoy here," he said. "I was hoping you might have news for me, Dr. Gaber."

"There is little enough. I experienced unexpected difficulties in the investigation—personal difficulties—"

"So I have heard," Sam said quickly.

"Nevertheless, I have accomplished a little." A new note of excitement rang in Gaber's tone. "The—*object* interested me and I do not give up easily. Some of the radiated impulses strangely resemble those already present in the human mind—neuro-mental fluctuations of potential of the type recorded by the electroencephalograph. They are, of course, many times more powerful, and can indeed be detected at some distance from their source."

Sam expelled his breath. "What would such waves do?"

Gaber paused. "That is difficult to say. The science of the mind is in its infancy. However, crude currents, if induced in the brain, cause visual images akin to colour, and indistinct sounds are heard by the patient. The process has been employed for many years in brain surgery. It is feasible to assume that more complex waveforms might induce complex images in the brain—"

"Such as seeing something which isn't really there?" Sam asked.

"Perhaps. We have insufficient data to be sure."

"Emotional feelings, too, might be induced?"

"Again—*perhaps*. It seems possible. The techniques used must be far in advance of anything we have. Visual sensation arises from minute fluctuations in the brain—brainwaves as they are termed. If those fluctuations were induced from outside the visual sensation could still arise. The same might apply to feelings of emotion.

Gaber paused, and Sam realised that scientific caution prevented the doctor from committing himself upon the strength of the information at his disposal.

"Briefly, I suspect that the object we examined is an apparatus of some complexity," Gaber continued. "It does not appear to be wholly automatic, but seems to contain a controlling entity."

"A controlling entity?"

"I cannot use a more specific term. I do not know. I will only give an example. If I saw a closed van halt at an intersection, then go on when the way was clear, I should deduce that it contained a controlling entity—in this case, a man."

"Have you tried X-Rays or photography?"

"Yes. Neither produces a satisfactory image. Apparently some kind of three-dimensional outline is present and photographs of the object are recognisable. X-Rays do not penetrate, but give a similar outline. That's all."

"Thanks."

Sam waited until the line went dead, then he stood by his office window, gazing at the streets and buildings and digesting what he had heard. Each *Heavenly Toy* was a deception; each held an entity—a *being*—concealed by the innocent, tri-dimensional outline which was all any human ever saw. Thus had the aliens filtered into earthly homes; he wondered when the second phase of their plan would begin. A second phase there must surely be, once they had arrived in sufficient numbers.

Two sky-blue lorries passed in the street below and his gaze followed them from sight. Men, in greed and ignorance, were introducing the enemy

His phone rang and he took it up. "Sam Tannoy here."

"This is Paul." The voice was tired, not without an undertone of panic. "I've traced Linda."

Sam felt mixed emotions. "Yes—?"

"She came here right enough, alone, and spent a great deal of time asking questions."

"You've found her?" Sam interrupted.

"No."

"But you said you had!"

"Not quite! I've traced her movements—that's all I can say on the phone. She had an idea, and apparently, she tried it!"

"What idea?"

"That I can't explain, now. You'd better come yourself."

"I'm on my way," Sam said.

As he drove he wondered what Paul had meant. The dismay and urgency in his voice had been all too obvious, and his words enigmatical.

Sam judged that it was almost noon when he began to descend towards the familiar buildings, each shining with new paint under the sun that was hot in an almost cloudless sky. Two-thirds of the fence had been completed. Paul was walking up the dusty

road and Sam slowed the saloon quickly, startled by his appearance. His disordered hair suggested that he had been fighting; he was unshaven, with eyes so intense they almost glowed with inner light.

Sam leaned over and pushed open the opposite door. "You look done in. Sit down."

Paul smiled fleetingly, wan. "Only lack of sleep. I stayed here all last night."

"Tell me about it." Sam hid his impatience, wondering what was to come. "You're sure Linda came here?"

"Absolutely." Paul Hardniss relaxed in the seat. "The girl in Kedrick's outer office told us that. I've found other people who saw her, too. There's no mistake." He sighed and closed his eyes. "I tried to find out what line she'd been following, and I've pieced it together fairly well. Some of the workmen remembered her clearly, wondering why she was so interested. She asked where loads were taken—and *where they came from*."

He halted and Sam felt abrupt unease, chilling and stronger than ever before.

"They couldn't tell her," he murmured.

"No. But from what they say I think she got a good idea of the truth—that the store rooms become full every night."

The other looked at him fully for the first time and Sam was amazed at the agony in the tired eyes. Paul loved Linda, he thought. That was clear. He was glad. In other circumstances, Linda would have been glad, too, he was sure.

"It's clear she had suspicions," Paul said, looking away down the dusty road. "She went so far as to say the *Toys* must be stopped, one man told me. Then she went away."

"I see," Sam said. "I found out a few things, too—but that can wait. What else?"

"I waited about, came out on the road, but apparently missed you. After that it was getting dark and I decided to stay here to see if Linda came back. One of the men remembered something she'd said, and I didn't like it—"

"What?" Sam interrupted.

"I'm going to find out where they come from—those were her words."

Sam expelled his breath sharply. Linda, through logic or intuition, had apparently decided something strange was arising.

"Yes?" he breathed.

"I couldn't find her. I looked round the buildings, then I thought I heard a noise. It was dark, then." His voice shook. "I

got up to the window where we watched before. After a time the pink ring came on, just as when we saw it." He halted; his lips twitched and he looked at Sam. "I did all I could—you believe that . . . ?"

"Of course!"

"The—the *things* began coming through, like the first time we saw them. When they stopped I saw that someone had been in the store room all the time, hiding—Linda. And I saw what her words meant. I called, but it was too late. She jumped up from behind cases near the door"

He faltered to a standstill and Sam had a dreadful feeling that he could guess what was coming. Sometimes Linda was impulsive. And she had said she would find where the *Heavenly Toys* came from!

"Yes?" he said.

"She ran through the pink ring, that's all. Then it went out."

Chapter VIII.

"You're sure?" Sam asked for the tenth time.

Paul Hardniss nodded without hesitation. "Absolutely. She simply passed through the ring and vanished. I ran to the door, which was unfastened. She wasn't there. I spent the rest of the night watching and searching—but it was no use."

Sam looked down at the blue buildings. They had eaten: he had seen that Paul had needed food. Afterwards they had returned to the slope above the *Heavenly Toy Co.* sheds.

"I'm going through that ring myself, tonight," Paul stated suddenly.

Sam had felt this to be coming. He spread his fingers over the wheel, wondering what to say. "It may be dangerous."

Linda went, so I can, too!"

That was not logic, Sam thought, but it fitted. Paul wanted Linda; possibly Linda had wanted him. That changed things.

We don't even know the purpose of the ring," Sam pointed out. "It may be a doorway into another dimension. It may be other things, and unsafe for a human being."

The other's lips compressed and he did not speak. Sam saw that his mind was made up, and felt forced to admire him. It was a brave gesture—a step into the wholly unknown.

"We've no real idea of what we're up against," Sam pointed out.

He related what Gaber had said. "You'll not know what to expect."

"Linda went," Paul repeated stubbornly.

Sam wondered whether he would let Paul go *alone*, but remained silent.

They sat in the car at the top of the slope until darkness came. Workmen, tiny with distance, had laboured at the fence, but it remained incompleated. Sam wrote out a factual report of all he knew and inserted it in an envelope addressed to Russell. He dropped the envelope on to his driving seat as he got out. If they did not come back it would be found with the abandoned car.

They went down to the buildings and unscrewed the pad-locked fastening of the broad wooden doors. Sam wondered whether they had been left unlocked the previous night by unlucky chance, or whether Linda had bribed the person responsible. Inside was dim, with shelves and crates obscure in the gloom. Outlines were visible and Sam saw that many *Heavenly Toys* had been removed during the day, leaving a great number of places to be filled. Apparently many *objects*, as Gaber termed them, would be arriving that night.

"She simply *vanished*," Paul murmured.

Sam felt his tension growing. "Yes. The ring is probably created by some device the *other side*—wherever that is. They seem good at electronics."

They waited, eyes prickling with watching in the darkness. Every moment Sam expected the pink ring—manifestation of some unknown technique—to appear. But the shadows remained unbroken.

"It seems delayed, tonight," Paul breathed at last.

Sam felt the tension, so long endured, growing unbearable. He moved uneasily, wishing the moment for action had already come. To wait, not knowing, was worst of all.

The minutes dragged and Sam wondered whether the other *Heavenly Toys* were aware of their presence, or whether each was confined within its adopted outline and unaware of the external world. So far, each of the *Toys* had been passive, living its role faithfully, except when faced with personal danger . . . His scalp prickled as he recalled Gaber's words—a sentience, a living, thinking entity, concealed within each *Toy* . . . waiting, one assumed, for some prearranged moment when they would come revealed in their true form . . .

"It must be after midnight—"

Paul's words held a new unease and Sam sensed its cause.

Before, there had been the risk of personal danger, but the hope of helping Linda. Now, dawned the fear that Linda would never be found again.

"There's still time," he whispered.

As minutes dragged into hours he began to feel strangely helpless. Finally dawn began to lighten the windows and the pink ring had not appeared. They waited until it was nearly daylight, then Sam rose stiffly from behind the empty cases.

"It's not coming," he said bleakly.

They went out and he started as he saw Paul's face in the early morning light. Haggard, his cheeks had shrunk; his eyes burned almost as with fever.

"*Linda went through*," he said.

Sam screwed the fixture quickly into position. He guided his companion between the sheds and back the way they had come. Only when they were nearly at the saloon did Paul stop, looking at him fiercely.

"This means they discovered her! They know she went through last night, and determined no one else should have the chance to do the same!"

"Not necessarily, Sam objected. Yet what Paul said seemed likely, he thought. "There could be other reasons."

Paul groaned. "What reasons?"

Sam took his place behind the wheel in silence. He put the report, now never to be delivered, into the dash pocket.

"There *are* no other reasons!" Paul stated, leaning in at the other door. "I was a fool last night! I should have noticed that someone was inside! I should have stopped her!"

Sam met his eyes. "I'm her father! I don't blame you—or anyone! That should be enough for you. Get in and shut up!"

Surprise came into the pained eyes; their wildness faded; a crooked smile came fleetingly. "Sorry, Sam. Guess I'm taking it like a kid. But—"

"I know," Sam said, "I love Linda too."

He started the saloon and turned back over the hill. The blue roofs of the *Heavenly Toy Co.* went from view behind.

"We're going back to that house I visited," Sam stated. "We may be able to do something from there!"

He saw that Paul was roused to a new interest. At the roadside kiosk he halted and rang Russell.

"I've an idea which may interest you," Russell said. He sounded tired. "That man you told me about had a housekeeper."

Sam wondered what was coming. "I plan to go there now, to see if I can turn anything up."

"Good." Russell's tone was satisfied. "Then you can look up this woman." Paper rustled. "She's a Mrs. Higgins, elderly, I gather, and living with a married son about half a mile before the place you visited. I want you to see what she can tell you."

"I will." Sam looked through the kiosk windows and decided that Paul was already impatient. "Anything else?"

"No—I was expecting news from your end."

"So was I, Mr. Russell."

Sam went out and started the car. He wondered whether Mrs. Higgins would have much to say; or much of real importance to relate, which might be very different!

Mrs. Higgins proved to be a small woman, grey, perhaps almost sixty, and with decided opinions about her previous employer. Her clear eyes sparkled and her face expressed prim reproof.

"I wouldn't have stopped there for *ten* times me wages!" she declared. "Not Sarah Higgins—after the things I *seen*! Such goings on down there as you wouldn't believe—"

"We want to hear about them, and you can be sure we shall believe what you say," Sam put in. He saw that she had been talking already and had probably been greeted by incredulous disbelief.

She put her hands under her print apron and looked pleased. "'Tis nice to find obliging gentlemen who will believe a body when she tells what she 'erself has seen with 'er own eyes," she stated.

"And what did you see"? Sam prompted.

She considered. "Before *they* came Mr. Thwaite was as nice a man as anywhere to be found," she declared at last. "Honest, kindly, civil to a body. But *after*—" She shuddered. "*After*—he'd go days without speaking; he'd lock hisself upstairs—didn't even let me dust up there—not that I wanted to pry into his affairs—"

"I'm sure you didn't," Sam agreed. "But *they—who* were *they*?"

Sarah Higgins shuddered. "I never saw them *properly*. They used to come in the dead of night. Mr. Thwaite used to lock me in my bedroom, too. He'd come quietly along, thinking me asleep, and fasten the door. After a long time—hours sometimes—he'd come back. I saw his face then, once—white as a ghost he was."

She paused expressively. Sam looked at Paul, a silent listener. Only the paleness about his mouth showed his tiredness, except for the pain in his eyes.

"Why did you leave, Mrs. Higgins?" Sam prompted.

She raised her hands expressively. "Could a body stay, an' things like *that* happening?" She puffed out her plump cheeks. "Sarah Higgins is no fool!" And when they built that tower, and began to come every night, I says to myself, 'Sarah,' I says, 'I'm leaving.' "

Sam started. "You saw them build it?"

"Well . . . not *exactly*, sir. But I saw *things* there in the garden, and the next day there was that tower, the like o' which nobody ever seen afore—"

"What kind of things did you see?"

She drew in her lips and twirled her hands in her apron. "*Shapes* sir— just *shapes*. Not really like anything, they was. Just shapes . . . "

"I see," Sam said slowly. "Is that all?"

"Not quite, sir." She seemed reluctant to admit the end of her knowledge had almost been reached. "The last night afore I came away Mr. Thwaite had locked himself in his room, and wouldn't answer. After a long time he came out, and he didn't seem to see me. Talking to hisself, he was, and looked that wild that I always remembered his words."

She stopped, and Sam saw that something important was coming. He nodded. "What did he say?"

"He was groaning, holding his head in his hands. '*They'll never go back to Sirius now,*' he said. '*Heaven forgive me for helping them—but I didn't know!*' Then he went into his bedroom, and lay down. He was bad—real bad—tossing and mumbling. The next morning I give in me notice."

"How long ago was that?"

"Three weeks, now, sir."

Sam bit his lips. He met Paul's eyes and read there his own fears. If the *Heavenly Toys* had come from Sirius—a star so remote that light itself took years to reach Earth—their creators must be skilled in techniques only in their infancy on Earth. So far, mankind had failed to land a projectile on the Moon—and that was mere thousands of miles, compared with the vast distance the creators of the *Heavenly Toys* had traversed successfully!

"Did your late employer have a name for these—visitors?" he asked slowly.

"Yes, sir. That is, there was a name he used once. It was

earlier, before he was bad. He was jolly, then—seemed pleased about something. 'The Cyenids are coming tonight, Mrs. Higgins,' he said. 'I'll be famous, yet!' I remembered that name, it being so strange."

"The Cyenids," Sam repeated slowly. "From Sirius."

"Them were his words, sir."

They thanked her and left. Sam started the car slowly. "I suggest we go on to Thwaite's and look into things from there," he said.

Paul nodded, silent, and they went on. The house was near and Sam turned the saloon in and stopped, looking through the window at the silent building. He wondered how many months had passed since the Cyenids had first contacted Thwaite, and what manner of beings they were. Thwaite had apparently expected to become famous as the first human to contact an extragalactic race; but the newcomers had used him as a tool, having other plans.

"They must be at a more advanced stage of civilisation than we are," he said pensively. "Mankind could not even attempt such a journey."

"No." Paul opened the door jerkily. "We're up against something all right!"

Sam led the way to the back of the house. It was silent, deserted—even more neglected than before, Sam decided.

"What happened during the time Thwaite was alone?" Paul asked quietly. Mrs. Higgins left over two weeks before you found him dead."

Sam did not answer. He did not know. He hated to imagine what had, perhaps happened Thwaite could have tried to warn humanity . . . could have been *prevented* . . . had, perhaps, been *killed*

He crossed to the narrow path and parted the bushes. His brows rose and he drew his breath sharply. The structure was gone. Only a bare space where nothing grew proved something had stood there.

Paul seemed to read his face. "It's gone?"

"Yes." Sam pointed to the naked earth. "That's where it stood. Apparently they want to remain concealed until the last moment."

Paul's gaze remained fixed on the cleared space. "How am I to find Linda?" he asked thinly. "*How*—when we've no way of contacting them?"

There was agony in his voice and Sam looked away towards

the house. Bitterly disappointed that the structure had gone, he could think of no reply.

"Let's see what we can find inside," he suggested.

The house was locked, now, but one window was unfastened. Sam guessed what the verdict of the local people was—Thwaite was an eccentric recluse who had died of starvation! Probably no other person besides Sarah Higgins had seen the alien structure in the garden, and few would believe her.

They went quietly upstairs to the room which had been an office, and Sam began a more thorough search than the previous opportunity had permitted. Slowly he realised what had happened. Thwaite had been a man with great scientific knowledge. The Cyenids had contacted him; he had anticipated easy fame. They had chosen their man well, Sam thought. After a time personal greed had played its part. Thwaite's income from the *Heavenly Toys* was staggering. Only after a time did he appear to realise the danger. By then, his co-operation was no longer necessary. *Heavenly Toy* wholesaling stores were established and deliveries taking place automatically.

"This place is a dead end, now," Paul stated miserably. "They'll never come back."

Sam examined him. Paul's friendly face was strained; his dark hair was ruffled, his eyes grim. It was obvious that for many days he had slept little but worried much. Sam felt an equal anxiety. He tapped a sheaf of notes that he had found. Many addresses were listed.

"These appear to be some of the agents Thwaite contacted, Paul," he said. "They are large branches of the *Heavenly Toy Co.* *Heavenly Toys* must still be arriving at some of them. That gives us the chance to make contact with Cyenids for ourselves.

"Unless no more are coming," Paul suggested flatly.

"That remains to be seen."

"There must be some tens of thousands here already! Suppose they discovered Linda? Suppose—"

"I'm supposing nothing," Sam stated, "and I recommend you to stop thinking like that. We can at least try to find somewhere the *Toys* are still arriving! There's no other way."

"No," Paul agreed. "There's no other way."

A thunderous knocking vibrated the back door as they went along the passage. Sam opened it to find Jones there, his face compressed into an expression of pugnacious determination.

"Where's my *Heavenly Toy*, Tannoy?" he rasped.

Sam sighed, one shoulder against the doorway. "I've ex-

plained. I thought I'd made it clear."

Jones scowled. "Lies—all lies! Smart fool you tried to make of me, with a tale like that! Aliens invading Earth! Do they look it—?"

"Of course not! The success of their plan depends upon people not knowing until its too late!"

Jones snorted with rage. "So you said before—I was fool enough to believe you then, but don't any longer!"

He compressed his lips, and Sam straightened, waiting. "Why should I steal your *Toy*?" he asked quietly. "There are plenty others—"

"Not like *mine*! Not that beautiful!"

Jones eyes blazed and Sam was silent—this was how every human felt about his own particular *Toy*. No argument would convince Jones.

"Let's go out and talk it over quietly, he suggested.

Jones's colour increased. "I didn't follow you here for more talk!"

He stepped forward and caught Sam by the shoulder, shaking his fist under Sam's chin. "I've finished with talk, Tannoy!" he stated roughly. "You're going to be sorry—"

"And you've started a game two can play," Sam said.

He twisted himself free, put a toe behind Jones's right ankle, and pushed him backwards. Jones sat on the paving, swearing. Sam jerked him to his feet again, seized his coat at the chest, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

"You're soft, Jones," he said. "Keep civil."

Jones swung a blow which grazed Sam's temple. Swearing, his eyes livid, he aimed a kick at Sam's stomach.

"I'll get you, Tannoy!"

"We'll see!"

Sam sprang, pinioning his arms. Paul came from the dim passage and they held Jones captive.

"Going to be reasonable?" Sam demanded.

Jones heaved, striving to free himself. "It's all lies!" he grated.

Sam met Paul's gaze. "The scullery had a lock," he said.

They hustled Jones into the tiny room and fastened the door. Blows rained on the door, then stopped.

"I'll get you now if it's the last thing I do!" Jones's muffled voice declared.

"Everything I've told you is true," Sam declared loudly.

Kicks that shook the wood were the only answer.

"He doesn't believe you," Paul murmured.

They went out, round the house, and Sam started his saloon. It would be difficult to make people believe—Jones's attitude showed that. The *Toys* appeared so innocent, so harmless . . .

"I'll send someone back from the village to let him out," Sam said pensively. "I hope he sees reason—I don't want him after my blood! I've troubles enough!"

He settled down to drive back. There seemed little more they could do that day.

Chapter IX.

Sam slowly got out of bed, stretched himself, and stood by the window. Much of his fatigue was gone, and he wondered what the new day would bring. The pretence that things were normal could no longer be kept up. Ruth was awake, and watched him, but did not speak.

"Do you realise that mankind is falling a victim to an attack so clever that most people don't even know there's danger?" Sam asked.

She did not reply. He sat on the edge of the bed. Her eyes were bright, almost as with fever; her face thin and pale. She had eaten too little and lost too much sleep, he thought.

"You can't go on like this very much longer." He wondered how—and when—the end would come. "Can't you throw this feeling off? Let me take your *Heavenly Toy* away—"

"Oh, no!" She caught his arm quickly. "Not that, Sam!"

He leaned over, watching her intently. "But don't you *realise* how silly this is—?"

She closed her eyes. "Sometimes, Sam. Sometimes I wonder what's happened to me. I decide I won't bother—about *it* any more. But that's no use. I can't help myself. I try, but it's no use. It seems to—to hypnotise me . . ."

She trailed off, and Sam knew that she could not explain how she felt. He himself had experienced the fascination of the *Heavenly Toys*; several times he had almost become a victim himself. He wondered why he had a degree of immunity denied to others.

He got up, but she clung to his arm. "Promise you won't take it away, Sam," she pleaded.

He unclasped her fingers gently. "I promise," he agreed flatly.

He dressed and went down, wondering whether Gaber and

Cavendish had discovered anything further. Or, again, whether Cavendish had fallen victim to the model's fascination, becoming its guardian and protector. He laughed briefly, an unpleasant sound to his own ears. That was what people were becoming, he thought bitterly—the guardians of the very objects which, by their presence, formed an insidious threat to humanity!

It was significant that Ruth had not asked where he was going, he thought. Nor had she enquired whether Linda was found.

He drove to the Syndicate building through streets so quiet that it might have been a much earlier hour. He had asked Paul to call, and wondered whether he would be waiting. First must come the search for a wholesale store still mysteriously receiving consignments of *Heavenly Toys* each night.

Russell had been asking for him and Sam went straight to his office. His lean face was concave and lined and he sat behind his desk with the expression of a man oppressed by grave responsibilities.

"This is the beginning of the end for mankind, Tannoy," he stated. "People *won't believe* that there is danger. That fact is disastrous. I've spoken to some of my colleagues—they think I'm a crank! They suggested I'd been over-working!" His face expressed disgust. "I told them I had a fragment of metal of non-earthly origin. They said the analysts must have been mistaken. I told them the analysts' names—they shrugged—probably a new element had been discovered, they said. It had happened before." He spread his hands. "That's what we're up against everywhere. Nobody believes. They explain away the few facts we have. They don't *want* to believe. Mankind has always regarded itself as the most intelligent and knowledgeable species in the universe! Nobody likes to admit that there may be beings more advanced than us. I've tried to convince them—and failed."

Sam nodded. This was how he had expected things to be. An invasion by force of arms would have been understood and repelled; but this invasion by stealth was going undetected.

"So what?" he asked.

Russell bounced a fist on his desk with unusual emotion. "We must do what we can—attack these things, show them we're not defenceless!" He looked up, his eyes burning. "*We must find a way to them, Tannoy!*"

"I only know one way—through the pink ring."

Russell nodded, his gaze direct. "Are you prepared to try?"

He paused, tapping on the desk. "I'll tell you why I ask. You realise the danger. You know something must be done. You have added reasons—personal reasons—for going. Finally you seem immune to the *Toys*—"

"Only slightly," Sam corrected. "One that was in the back of my car nearly got me!"

Russell looked disappointed. "Naturally, if you think better of it—"

"I didn't say that! I'll go. As you say, I have—reasons."

"Good." Russell flipped open a file. "This note was left for you. As you were coming right up I kept it."

He pushed a slip across the desk. Sam took it. It was short—a mere pencil scribble. "Gone back. P." He raised his eyes.

"Anything further?"

"Nothing."

It was from Paul, Sam thought. He would not be calling. Instead, he had returned to either Thwaite's house or the blue sheds of the *Heavenly Toy Co.* The note did not reveal which.

Russell was watching him. "That mean anything, Tannoy?" he asked.

Sam screwed the note up and dropped it in the waste basket. "Nothing I didn't expect." He remembered how restless Paul had been the previous night. "What time was it handed in?"

"An hour after midnight."

"I see." So Paul had not been able to wait. His impatience and concern for Linda had driven him to this act. "Anything else?"

"A report from Dr. Gaber. Nothing much in it you don't already know. Seemingly Cavendish has gone the way of other folk we know. He wouldn't let Gaber touch the *Toy*. They had a real row over it. Gaber's a good man. He suspects that the *Toys* receive their power from some external source—pick it up like radio. He's sure that they keep up communication between themselves. Naturally he's not been able to make sense of the signals which may be used for communication. He expects to discover more, in time, but won't commit himself beyond that, at present."

"And the metal fragment?"

"He's still convinced it's of alien origin. He's prepared to stick to that against any opposition. He suggests there may have been a temporary breakdown of some kind in the electro-mechanical elements of the *Toy*."

"That's possible," Sam agreed. He himself had given it a certain amount of mis-treatment! "Keep him at it."

A buzzer on Russell's desk sounded and he pressed a switch. "Russell here."

"An item about the *Heavenly Toys* has come in!" The voice over the reproducer sounded to Sam like that of a young reporter who imagined he had important news. "You asked to be told personally about such items—"

"Yes." Russell was impatient. "What is it?"

"Murder! But murder that's insane, with no attempt at concealment! Apparently someone believed his *Toy* had been deliberately stolen!"

"Where? Is that all?"

"I haven't had time to discover more, Mr. Russell." He gave the address. "I'll ring again—"

"I'm sending a man; wait." Russell's finger snapped off the communicator. His eyes settled on Sam. "You got that address? Go round and look into this—it may be worth while."

Sam looked at the floor. Such a crime of violence, he thought.—all for a *Heavenly Toy*! But that was how folk felt about them

"If anything arises, ring me," Russell said.

Sam let himself out. He wondered where Jones was, remembering the fierce, angry light in his eyes.

The young reporter was waiting, and Sam left his saloon against the kerb. A policeman was keeping idle sightseers away from the house gateway, but admitted him.

"A police car will be along to pick the man up," the young reporter said. "We may not be able to see him."

Sam nodded. "I'm not after a sensational story with pictures—only the bare facts."

They went in. Somewhere a woman was sobbing quietly. Voices sounded from a door a little way along the passage and Sam looked through. A man in his early forties sat with his head on his hands; watchful and alert, an officer stood just behind him. The man groaned.

"I—I didn't intend to do it!"

The officer appeared unmoved. "You will be able to make a full statement at the station." His voice was impersonal, cold.

The man raised his head; his face was agonised. "But don't you see! He was my *brother*! I don't know what came over me! Something *made* me do it!"

Normally, it could have been temporary insanity, Sam thought. But he could see the man's eyes: they were those of a person wholly sane, moist with regret, but nothing more. The

regret in the voice was genuine too, Sam felt chilled. *One of the Heavenly Toys had brought a rational human being to this*, he thought. Where would it end?

"It was done in a fit of temper," the young reporter whispered in Sam's ear. "I don't know whether his brother *had* stolen the *Toy*—I haven't been able to find out. Either way, it's pretty grim."

It was, Sam thought. Crimes of violence usually were. But this one was worse because of the relationship between victim and attacker, and the slender cause of such a terrible crime. He remembered Jones's fierce anger, and knew that he had been expecting something like this. Undoubtedly other cases would arise.

He withdrew down the passage. "Let's get out of here! I've seen enough. I shan't learn any of the things I want to know."

They went out, standing aside for the officers who had come to take the prisoner away. Sam wondered what the verdict would be. That of temporary insanity, he guessed. Such a verdict, again, would conceal the true nature of the *Heavenly Toys*. He watched the police car leave.

"I may be able to get Mr. Russell to make something of this," he mused aloud. "If we could prove some compulsive effect originating in the *Toy* that would help."

The young reporter looked at him with amaze. "You want to get the fellow off—prove him innocent—?"

Sam did not answer. The life of a single individual had ceased to be important. Ranking more important was the need to convince incredulous humanity that the *Toys* were dangerous and not what they seemed!

Glad to escape the scene of personal tragedy, Sam left his companion and started back. Sunshine made brilliant the streets and shone on the high buildings. All this—built by men for men—was threatened, Sam thought morosely. In the past, conflicts between sections of humanity had arisen, each more terrible as civilisation advanced. But the victors had always been some section of mankind. Now, it was different. Mankind was threatened by another species—by aliens, who, if victorious, would undoubtedly sweep away everything that men had created, so that no relic of it remained on Earth. Noble cities would be destroyed, and replaced by strange artifacts built by the invaders. Man's cultural heritage would vanish, together with mankind itself.

He guessed that his chief would be waiting, and went straight up to the office. Russell listened to his account with face bleak.

"It's only a beginning," he said at last. "Worse has happened."

Sam wondered at the gravity of his features. "Where?"

"Far enough away to show how widespread this affair is. Bombay. There's been rioting. The cabled report was detailed enough to give a clear picture. There's been a tremendous influx of reputedly sacred objects—and from the description I'm sure they're *Heavenly Toys*. You know what some of these religious sects are, out there, in particular. Apparently a Moslem group was accused of temple-robbing. We'll never hear the truth of the affair, but there's been a lot of bloodshed."

Sam felt chilling dismay. "What form did the *Toys* take?"

"I don't know—but you can be sure they adopted something suitable!"

Sam nodded. It was terrifying to know that the invasion was upon such a large scale. Apparently centres of attack were scattered over the whole planet.

"I want you to defend the man who killed his brother," Sam said abruptly.

Russell's brows rose. "Is any defence possible?"

"Yes! Try to show that some exterior compulsion existed! Dr. Gaber may be able to help. Prove the man was sane, and always has been. Unearth every fact which can bear any weight at all—"

"In short, use the case to show that the *Heavenly Toys* are dangerous," Russell interrupted, new animation in his voice. "It may help—though it'll be difficult!"

"You could get as many authoritative opinions as possible, to back you up. Doctors should be able to testify to his sanity. The medical history of his parents can be checked . . . Gaber can prove the *Toys* emit radiations of unknown purpose."

Russell nodded. "It shall be done! A sound plan. I'll look into it and let you know."

Sam returned to his own office to clear up a few routine tasks. No message had come from Paul; nothing indicated exactly what he had had in mind. Sam wondered whether he had succeeded in finding a wholesale store at which *Toys* were still arriving.

After working for an hour, he stretched and stood by the window. Blue-painted lorries loaded high with crates roped in position were passing. He watched them go from view and wondered if they had come from the wholesale store twenty miles east of the city, where he and Paul had watched without result.

If so, new *Toys* had probably arrived there, to replace the depleted stocks.

His desk communicator buzzed and he answered it. Russell sounded annoyed.

"I've been into your idea," he said briefly. "It won't work."

Sam felt disappointed. "Why?"

"Several reasons. First, no man of repute would touch the case on the lines we had in mind—it would jeopardise their reputations, they say. Some of them seem to think we're cooking up a stunt."

"You should be able to get an able man if you pay enough!"

"Perhaps." Russell sounded tired. "But I doubt it. The better the the men the more they value their professional reputations! I doubt if there's a Q.C. in the country worth mentioning who'd plead on the lines you suggested." He paused. "That's not all. The prisoner's grandfather died under somewhat curious circumstances. A shooting accident. But it could have been suicide. That throws grave doubt upon the mental stability of the prisoner. It seems likely a verdict of guilty but temporarily insane will be brought in."

That ended it, Sam thought. He was sure the man had been sane. Probably his grandfather had been, also. But that sanity would now be tenfold more difficult to prove.

There now seemed only one thing he could do—follow Linda and Paul. He tidied his desk and went down to the saloon.

* * * *

Created by beings of a type and culture wholly alien to Earth, a million strange objects lay scattered in thousands of cities. Each was jealously prized by its human possessor, who saw in it perfection. Some appeared as toys, some as ornamental objects of outstanding and attractive beauty. Children adored them, not knowing why. Adults were captivated, sometimes wondering whence arose the hypnotic spell, yet were unable to throw it off. Disguised as objects of artistic integrity, they were to be found in the homes of great men; resembling objects of religious devotion, others were treasured by the poor of many lands. Natives regarded them with awe; men of culture strove to analyse their hypnotic appeal. None suspected what the objects really were. Prized, protected, they were the treasured possessions of white, brown, and yellow races alike.

Silent and secretly within the heart of each object, its controlling entity waited. Only from each one of its fellows passed a constant stream of information, carried on radio frequencies not

used by man. Born on a distant planet that drifted around a huge sun, they had never known day and night and never slept. Immeasurably long-lived, time mattered but little to them. They felt no impatience as the days slipped by, but were anxious only that their plan should most perfectly succeed so that a new and suitable planet would become available for their habitation. Using compact apparatus of great complexity, they studied the buildings and other objects around them, scanning with seeing beams everything both far and near. They thought man's method of locomotion crude and ineffectual. Even his swiftest vehicles were slow and awkward, compared with the speed and ease with which they could move themselves upon their tractor beams. His buildings they thought ugly, fit only to be toppled into rubble.

Strange, they waited, conscious that the time was drawing near. The voyage across light-years of space had not been undertaken without full preparation . . . their plan was perfected to the last detail—it was one they had used on other planets circling other suns, always with success. They felt confident that it would succeed again.

* * * *

Alone in the silent darkness of the store, Sam almost ceased to breathe as the pink ring shimmered and grew more clear. He wondered by what scientific process it was created, and from where it lead.

Shapes came, moving quickly to fill the vacant spaces. Muscles tensed, he waited. Time passed and the stream of arriving objects thinned, eventually ceasing. *This was it*, he thought.

He sprang from behind the empty cases and leapt towards the ring, diving for its centre, his hands outstretched. He wondered whether it would snap out of view before he could reach it, and half hoped that it would . . . Abruptly, at this last moment, his act seemed akin to suicide. A dozen possible causes of death jumped to his mind—dangerous electrical potentials might exist . . . at the other side of the ring might exist conditions which no human could tolerate . . .

He was upon it, and its perimeter glowed around him. A tingling shot through every limb, muscle and nerve of his body. Lights sparkled before his eyes, and a whining sound of thunderous volume tore at his ears. He seemed to be ascending headlong through a giant tube, the walls of which shimmered and glowed around him . . . Or perhaps he was falling, he thought, dazed. No sensation of weight existed, only the tumbling, headlong motion between surrounding walls like ruby fire.

He realised that consciousness was going. His head rang, his senses were slipping. His limbs felt torn by gigantic forces that plucked at his clothing and flesh, and the air seemed to be sucked from his lungs. Blackness enveloped him; his last conscious thought was regret that he had made the attempt . . .

Chapter X.

As if from a remote distance Sam's consciousness slowly returned. He became aware that he was crumpled on a hard, shining surface, unyielding and glassy, and that a mellow radiance filled the space around him. He rose slowly to hands and knees, then stood up stiffly, abruptly awake to his danger.

A murmurous humming filled the air, coming from somewhere unknown and echoing round the chamber, which was illuminated from above by a soft, creamy light. The chamber was empty, but one wall seemed transparent. Behind it stood apparatus and machinery so complex that Sam felt unable to take it in. It produced the pink ring, he assumed. Two other walls were featureless; the third had a rectangular doorway with no door, and he moved cautiously towards it. Gravity seemed to be reduced, giving a feeling of lessened weight. From the side of the opening he peered through.

Ahead was a corridor, low so that he would have to stoop to pass along it. Illuminated by the same diffused light, it had openings along both walls at equal intervals. He wondered whether Linda and Paul had arrived in this same chamber, and what had happened to them. Unexpected dangers could arise at any moment.

He went to the first opening and looked through. A further corridor ran from it, a right-angle bend obstructing the view. From the bend he looked into a larger room vacant except for low hutches with circular openings occupying one wall. Amazed, he gazed at them, wondering what their purpose was.

Abruptly a sense of danger came, and he looked back. A silvery, almost transparent object was coming along the corridor and he froze, pressing himself against the wall. The object moved slowly; he could have taken it up in his two hands as he would have lifted a puppy. But this was no puppy—no creature such as he had known on Earth . . . Its outline was almost spherical, and transparent so that he could see directly through it as through a glass globe; inside, a pink dot like a red eye wobbled and oscillated

continually, and he sensed that the thing was *alive*. He remembered Sarah Higgin's words: "Shapes, coming up the path" She had perhaps seen something such as this, he thought. It was alive—but such a form of life as he had never expected to see. Strange, alien, unearthly, it came on, its means of locomotion not visible. It passed so close that he could have touched it, went into the room, crossed it, and disappeared into one of the tiny cubicles. Shivering, he could scarcely believe he had escaped observation. A sudden possibility arose: perhaps the thing could not *see* as humans did. Perhaps it employed some other sense unknown to men, and had not observed him.

He withdrew with infinite stealth along the corridor, scarcely breathing. The shape with its brilliant, oscillating dot did not reappear.

The second doorway led into a corridor which appeared to end in space. Beyond its far end was bright sky, and he went along slowly. The corridor ended in a long platform quite without any form of protective rail, and Sam experienced dizziness and abrupt realisation of his position as he stepped towards its edge.

He was aboard a space-ship so large that the narrow platform stretched ahead out of sight, disappearing gradually round the curved side of the vessel. Brilliant sunshine glared above the horizon formed by the vessel's huge bulk over where he stood. Far below the unfenced platform dabs of white stood revealed as clouds. Through breaks in the cloud an outline of land was visible, recognisable as the western end of Europe. His eyes followed the coastline of France into the hazy distance where Spain was visible in dim relief. Eastward, cloud obscured the view. To the west, ocean stretched into the remote distance where sea and sky appeared to blend. He thought of the vertical beam which he had first seen from his bedroom, and realised the truth. He was in a vessel which was maintaining an orbit round Earth, so high that its presence was undiscovered. But never had he seen such a ship, or believed that one of such mighty proportions could exist.

Dizzy, he retreated into the mouth of the corridor, awed by the size of the ship and the ability of the beings who had created it. Techniques unknown to Earthly science must be used, he thought. No explosive drumming of rockets could be heard, as he would have expected. Nor did the wind which must surely be created by their motion whistle round the vessel; instead, it seemed to be surrounded by its own envelope of air, maintained at such a pressure that the great altitude was unimportant.

Two of the objects such as he had seen before appeared round

the curvature of the ship on the platform, coming towards him. Each only cast a thin shadow in the sunshine, and tiny, pink orbs at their cores wobbled and danced.

He retreated quickly to the main corridor, not waiting for them to draw near. A glance through a doorway showed a room filled with machinery—strange units on wheels and obviously mobile, and surmounted by long, curved tubes. *Weapons*, Sam thought. The attackers were apparently ready for opposition and prepared to overcome it. Wondering what terrible devastation the curious mechanisms could wreck, he went quickly on. His best plan seemed fairly clear—he must find Linda and Paul, if possible and then in some way return to Earth.

He went on through the great vessel, often pausing, sometimes retracing his steps. Fewer of the strange living organisms were to be seen than he had expected. He assumed that uncounted myriads of them had already settled upon the planet they expected to conquer, concealed as *Heavenly Toys*. When he was still they did not appear to apprehend his presence. Once, when he moved, four of the objects came towards him, bobbing from side to side as if to discover him. For a long time he stood motionless as stone, a cold dew springing to his forehead, while they searched back and forth along the corridor. One almost touched his feet, but went on. They were like creatures without vision, he thought. The four at last went away, returning with an apparatus which they set up at the end of the corridor. *A scanner*, Sam thought. He slipped through the nearest door, gained the exterior platform, and went on until he could enter by a further doorway. He only gave a single glance at the abysmal drop beside him. Shadow was creeping over the earth. Soon the ship would be upon the planet's night side, in darkness.

He ascended a long, curving ramp to a higher level, and emerged upon a second platform which ran like a great fin round the ship. Ahead of him was the high, domed back of the vessel. Upon it stood complex radiating antennae, beamed towards the Earth below. A continuous halo of electronic fire burned round the aerials, suggesting incalculable power. Static crackled continuously, and Sam remembered Gaber's suggestion that the *Toys* received their power from some external source. Probably here was that source, he thought. The aerials radiated radio-frequency energy which was picked up by the *Toys* below.

He tried to work his way nearer, but failed. The dome upon which the aerials stood was smooth and could never be scaled. He could only look up from a distance, and marvel anew at the scien-

tific knowledge of the beings who had come so far from their native world.

After a time he descended again into the vessel. A tiny fragment of coloured silk lay at the foot of the slope and he picked it up quickly, suppressing an exclamation. He had seen material of that colour and texture before—in Linda's hand, long before the first *Heavenly Toys* had come. A piece torn from her handkerchief, it could mean many things. It could have been left as a sign, if help should come; or could have been dropped by accident, or during a struggle for freedom.

He gazed around, listening. Murmurous power filled the ship, but there was no other sound. He began to search hurriedly through the dimly-lit corridors. So few of the invaders were present that their plan must be almost completed, he thought. Many chambers were empty. Others housed complex equipment of unknown purpose, and he assumed that the ship was a self-contained world with everything that the Cyenids would require to set up their reign on Earth. One door gave access to a balcony which looked down upon a great power-plant where many of the globular forms moved. A regular humming arose from it, and he withdrew hastily. It seemed to be the central power-house of the whole vessel.

At length he halted, wondering whether his search would be in vain. The ship was so huge that it would take many days to explore even a small part of it, especially hindered as he was by having to remain concealed. He must also try to remember the general arrangement of the corridors, he decided, in order that he could return to the chamber into which the teleportation beam had brought him.

A corridor ended in a chamber where pink light flickered, and he peered in cautiously. Indistinct shapes were moving into a glowing ring such as he had seen in the *Heavenly Toy Co.* buildings. As each flickered from sight he felt momentary elation. From here the apparatus was transporting the Cyenids instantaneously to the Earth below . . . therefore he had only to spring through the ring to be safe. But as he watched his confidence diminished. By now the space ship had undoubtedly travelled a vast distance—if he stepped through the ring he might emerge upon the Earth thousands of miles from his home! The idea shocked him. He realised, too, that this was not the chamber into which he had first come. Sobered he withdrew. It would be easy to make a fatal mistake, he thought.

The scanning machine which he had seen before stood at an

intersection. Electronic eyes upon its top slowly rotated, searching the corridors. *They knew he was there and were searching for him*, Sam thought in dismay.

He doubled down the nearest passage, running silently. Ahead, bobbing in the doorway, were several of the globes. He jumped back, reaching the opposite passage.

A glance to his right as he passed showed that the scanner was following him, moving rapidly on caster-like wheels. He wondered whether one of the creatures was guiding it, or whether it was some type of automatic mechanism.

He increased his speed, taking the first turnings he saw. One dipped abruptly from the level corridor, descending at a steep slope. He fell headlong, hands outflung, rolled over, and struck the unyielding metal floor at the bottom with an impact forcing the breath from his lungs. As he rose pain shot from ankle to knee, so excruciating that he almost cried aloud from agony and surprise. He swore silently, propping himself against the corridor wall, his weight supported on his sound foot.

Except for the murmurous undertone that never ceased, the ship was quiet. But that did not mean the search had ended, he thought uneasily. These beings from light-years away, moved soundlessly.

He examined his foot quickly. A large swelling had appeared around the ankle, but he could not decide whether a bone was broken. Intense pain shot up his leg when he let his weight rest upon it.

He limped on slowly, supporting himself with one hand against the wall. He knew that he had lost a clear idea of his position in the vessel, and sought for a way to the external platform which encircled it. Only after a long time, and many pauses, did he emerge to a view of the night sky. Stars shone in a clear sky; below were other flecks of light, dimmer and more diffused. Each showed where a great city lay, he thought, awed. And the inhabitants of those cities were ignorant of the silent vessel above.

He tried to estimate his position, and saw that a further platform ran parallel to his own some twenty feet above his head. He frowned, trying to remember whether it had been there before, unnoticed. If not, then he was at a lower level in the ship than had previously been the case.

He went on slowly, and returned into the dimly lit interior of the ship. At a corner ahead a scanning apparatus stood. He drew back, wondering whether it was that which he had first seen, or a duplicate. From the angle of the corridor he saw that a light had

begun to flash upon its top. The light was violet, and within the visible spectrum of the Cyenids, he assumed. Almost immediately four of them appeared, coming down the corridor. The scanner followed, rolling swiftly.

Biting his lips, he hurriedly retreated. He realised now, that his first estimation of his chances had been wrong—he could not hope to remain undiscovered indefinitely. Even though the vessel was almost deserted, nowhere was safe.

He knew that he could not go far and the pain in his foot was almost unendurable. The passage led into a large chamber. Above his head was a projection forming a shelf and he sprang up to it. Apparently the end of a large girder, it offered just sufficient room for him to sit with his knees under his chin. Below, level with the door through which he had entered, a balcony ran round the chamber. He froze, motionless as the mobile apparatus rolled into view, its scanners rotating. Behind it came the transparent globes, their bright inner orbs bobbing. He watched them with a chill feeling that made his skin creep. No matter what personal danger threatened, he must warn his fellow men, he thought. The Earth must never belong to such strange, alien creatures.

As time passed he saw that he would undoubtedly be discovered unless something happened to draw the search away. Below the balcony itself all was dim, but bobbing orbs of light showed that many of the Cyenids were down there. So far as he could see, there was no other doorway to the balcony except that by which he had entered.

Perhaps he could draw attention elsewhere, he thought. In one pocket was a torch which he had not needed to use. He took it out and with a powerful swing of his arm set it spinning across to the opposite wall. It struck with a clatter and fell to the balcony. He watched, motionless. Some mechanism in the mobile apparatus had apparently detected the sound. The machine rolled forwards, halted at a distance of several paces from the torch, and grew still. Sam noticed that its scanners were aligned exactly on the object he had thrown.

Abruptly a yellow beam appeared from the front of the machine. The torch glowed red . . . yellow . . . became white-hot and collapsed into a globule of molten metal and ash which steamed and smoked on the balcony floor. The yellow beam went out.

Sam bit his lips, wondering how near death he had been when the machine had followed him. He wondered whether the apparatus could distinguish the true nature of the object it had

destroyed; if so, the search would begin again. If not, the machine would go away. He waited expectantly, scarcely breathing, wondering which it would be. Several of the Cyenids went along the balcony, halting a few paces from the cooling metal. He watched them in fascination, marvelling anew at their strangeness. They could not see objects as Earth creatures could, but might have other senses about which he knew nothing. Clearly they could construct efficient mechanisms of high complexity, bending the powers of nature to their will.

At last the scanner rolled away along the balcony, coming in a half circle to the doorway below the projecting girder. Immediately before the doorway it halted. A low humming drifted up from it and Sam knew that it would not go away. Vigilance was being maintained; if he moved and it discovered him it would flash a warning—might even use the destroying beam, if time permitted.

He wondered helplessly what he should do. The pain in his ankle had decreased—but that could be because his weight was not upon it. If he tried to run, and his leg failed him, it would be the end.

The dimness below the balcony began to clear, as if some hidden source of illumination was being uncovered. The moving forms of the aliens became more clearly seen. In their midst was a shadowy figure, and he stared at it, abruptly unconscious of his own personal danger. As the light grew he saw that there was not one figure, but two . . . they could have been men—surely *were* men, he thought. He strove to penetrate the gloom, and to see beyond the globular forms which moved and wavered, impeding his vision.

Only slowly did the light increase until he could see that he had been *almost* right . . . as realisation came he sat upright on the girder, an exclamation that could not be silenced coming to his lips. Two human figures, inert, unconscious, lay upon the floor below. In the strengthened light he recognised both.

Chapter XI.

Linda and Paul lay with eyes closed. Their faces were pale and unmoving, their hands folded upon their chests. Sam felt his blood run chill as he stared at them. He wondered whether he was—too late.

At his abrupt movement the steady whirring of the machine below him had changed. Its scanners began to move, lifting

slowly, and he knew that within mere seconds he would be discovered. Memory of the incandescent, destructive ray came vividly, and he sprang from the girder, landing on the balcony heavily. *Only by moving too quickly for the machine could he escape*, he thought.

Already it was rotating towards him, its warning light blinking. He lowered himself over the edge of the balcony, hung momentarily by his hands, then dropped, trying to take the impact of his fall upon his sound foot. Pain shot up his leg, bringing an exclamation which he could not stifle, but he regained his balance and spun round, springing towards the centre of the chamber.

Linda and Paul lay motionless, not a flicker of an eyelid revealing whether they still lived. With a glance over his shoulder up at the machine Sam ran to them. The bobbing orbs that were beings from another world withdrew before him—whether to keep out of range of the destroying ray, or whether through fear of personal contact with them, Sam did not know.

He swept Linda up and ran for the nearest door, biting his lips against the pain. The machine was rolling round the balcony, the better to observe the line of his escape, and a sudden, brilliantly yellow radiance sprang from it. He dodged for the opening the heat of the beam a yard above his head scorching like an open furnace. The air crackled as with an electrical discharge and a section of the wall glowed white hot. Then he was through the door, and knew that for a moment he was safe. The machine would have to descend by another route.

He examined Linda, dropping to one knee, and saw with inexpressible relief that she lived. She seemed asleep—perhaps *hypnotised* would be a better word, he thought.

Somewhere above his head he heard a momentary trundling of wheels in rapid motion. He started erect and doubled back into the chamber. The scanning apparatus had gone from the balcony. He sprang in, seized Paul's shoulders, and dragged him to the doorway. There, he shook him roughly, slapping his cheeks. *Every moment counted*, he thought.... He looked round quickly, but the machine had not yet appeared at any of the corridor junctions. Several Cyenids bobbed and oscillated at an intersection, but did not approach.

"Wake up, Paul, it's me, Sam!" he urged.

The other did not move, though colour appeared to be returning to his cheeks. Sam stood up, looking around. The corridors seemed slightly familiar—if he was not mistaken the chamber into which he had first appeared should be ahead. It

offered their only chance of escape, and one immeasurably slight, he decided quickly.

A groan jerked his gaze back to Paul, who stirred feebly. Sam bent over him, almost shouting in his ear.

"Get moving! Our lives depend on it! Yours—mine—Linda's—!"

Paul moaned under his breath, his eyes still closed. Sam shook him.

"Seconds count! It's almost too late!"

The other's eyes opened slowly, dazed. "They—they caught us—"

The voice was weak. Glancing up Sam saw the machine appear in the end of the corridor. It pivoted once and came to rest with its scanners facing them. He caught Paul's shoulder, dragging him upright.

"Explanations can wait!" he said crisply. "Follow me!"

He jumped to the other side of the corridor. The scanners followed him and a momentary flash of yellow radiance glowed along the passage, hissing where it struck the panels. He lifted Linda as if she were again a baby and ran.

The corridor was curved. Electronic fire played on the wall at the bend a bare moment after he had passed. He knew upon how slight a chance their lives depended. If the teleportation apparatus in the chamber was not in operation there could be no escape . . .

He looked back. The corridor was empty as far as he could see along it and his spirits sank. Paul had not followed.

He slowed, again aware that agony shot up his leg at every step, though it had been momentarily forgotten. Ahead was the doorway, and he paused on the threshold.

The chamber was dimly illuminated. The complex apparatus along one side filled it with a throbbing murmur, and a pink ring wavered and glowed near the centre of the floor. Sam felt elation, followed by doubt and indecision. The corridors and chambers on other levels could appear the same . . . he did not know whether the pink ring would lead to safety . . . It might be attuned to some other reception point . . .

He looked back and saw that several Cyenids had emerged from a side doorway which he had passed. He stepped to the centre of the floor, hesitated momentarily, his face agonised, then toppled Linda gently through the pink ring. She vanished as if she had ceased to exist—without sound, without trace. *It was a chance he had had to take*, Sam thought.

He went back to the doorway. The mobile scanner was coming round the curve. Just ahead, on his right, was an intersection which seemed to offer an alternative route back and he dodged down it at a limping run. Corridors and passages met at right angles at regular intervals. Judging that he had gone far enough, he turned down one, and emerged into a wider corridor. A few yards away Paul lay motionless against the wall, but his eyes were again open. Sam realised that the machine must have passed him and that his very stillness had undoubtedly saved him. He tried to rise, supporting himself against the wall.

"I'm—done in, Sam . . ." he breathed.

Sam put an arm round him and helped him to the narrow passage. A whirring came from the corridor and the machine rolled back into view, travelling rapidly. Yellow light wavered and flickered from it, playing on the metallic walls.

"Keep on your feet and moving—for your life!" Sam urged.

They staggered along the passages and into the chamber into which he had first appeared. With infinite relief Sam saw that the pink ring was still there, glowing like a neon tube suspended in the air. Paul's strength seemed to be failing again. Sam half carried, half pushed him forwards. Cyenids were bobbing towards the long control panel, and he saw what their plan was.

"Through the ring, Paul!" he urged. "Quickly—it will be too late!"

He wondered whether they would be in time . . . and what would happen if the apparatus was switched off before they had reached Earth.

Groaning, half unconscious Paul toppled through the ring and disappeared. Sam followed him, aware that the loud humming of the apparatus was ceasing and that the ring had already begun to grow dim, like red-hot wire that cools . . .

* * * *

Russell leaned back in his chair and regarded Paul Hardniss with bleak eyes.

"So that's the last you saw of Sam Tannoy?" he asked.

"Yes." Paul nodded gravely. "He helped me to the room where the teleportation apparatus works, and pushed me through the ring. That much I remember, though I was half unconscious. I thought he would be following right away. I must have lost consciousness altogether—when I recovered I was in the building where we watched that first night. Sam didn't come . . ."

They stared at each other. Russell dropped his gaze to his desk and fiddled with the papers there. At length he looked up.

"What happened to Linda Tannoy?"

"I don't know. I had assumed Sam took her first and put her through the ring. She wasn't in the store room when I got there." His face was drawn. "I had found her easily enough. They had drugged or hypnotised her—they seem to know all about that kind of thing. But they caught me, too." He shook himself as if to throw off an unpleasant memory. "I was unconscious until I heard Sam shouting at me in the passage. I think he said something about Linda being safe." He frowned to himself, features lined. "I'm going back," he stated abruptly. "I've got to find out where she is—"

Russell leaned forwards, catching his arm in steel fingers. "Wait, you don't know everything—"

"But both of them may still be on the ship!"

"Perhaps," Russell agreed quietly. He relaxed in his chair. "You came through the pink ring. Linda wasn't waiting for you. Sam didn't follow. That's all we know."

"They *can't* have come!" Paul objected. "Sam would have let you know!"

Russell's eyes went to the clock on the opposite wall. "Yes. I should have heard, by now. From what you say, he must have followed you almost at once—or *not at all*."

"Then that's all the more reason why I should go back!"

"No," Russell said flatly. "If you do, the Cyenids may feel that there is immediate danger and act at once. That could be the end of—*everything*, for us."

Paul's face was white. "But—"

"Humanity must come before individuals," Russell declared, his face set. "These last twenty-four hours have been—hell. There have been riots in half the countries of the world. Theft is common—the thing stolen is always a *Heavenly Toy*. Murder with violence is becoming so frequent that it is ceasing to be news. Factories are closing down. Shops are empty. Trying to part people from their *Heavenly Toys* is like trying to keep drug addicts from opium—only worse! It's the beginning of the end for us, unless something is done quickly."

He was silent and Paul stood up, his face grim. "That's all very well, but I can't leave Linda and Sam! Sam saved me. Linda is—"

Russell sighed. "I'm sorry. I know how you feel. But you won't be allowed to return to the store."

"Not allowed?"

"No. Police are guarding the roads. The *Heavenly Toy Co.*

buildings are in the centre of a two-mile diameter zone. When anyone goes in it will be because they have a sound plan likely to help. This is a national matter, now. Individuals don't matter."

"You mean Linda and Sam don't matter—!"

"I didn't say that." Russell's voice was sharp, his face grey. "I'm more sorry about them than I can say." He controlled his voice with obvious effort. "That's all. Thought I'd tell you. If you try to break through the police cordon you'll only find yourself in jail . . ."

He looked at the clock again, and sank his head on his hands. He heard Paul go out, but did not look up. Only after a long time did he pull a phone using a special line across his desk. "Russell here." He was brisk, though deadly tired. "Have any messages of any kind come in for me? They haven't. Did you send the man to Tannoy's home? You did. He's not there? They haven't heard from him? I see. You haven't had a girl trying to contact me—Tannoy's daughter? No. I see."

He rang off, his lips compressed. There was no word from Sam Tannoy; none from Linda. Neither had been seen; neither could be found. He wondered what it meant. Once his lips moved. "I sent him," he murmured. "He was a good man, was Sam."

At length he depressed a push. The central desk-girl's voice came over the intercom. "Yes, Mr. Russell."

"Send up the departmental chiefs."

"The agency chiefs, Mr. Russell? Or the chief sub-editors—?"

"All of them! Agency chiefs, sub-editors, syndicating department leaders—all of them—and their assistants!"

He cut the intercom against the girl's exclamation of surprise. He got up, took a turn round his office, gazed from the broad window, then returned to his desk. He sat there with his face expressionless, only with an abrupt nod motioning the men who began to arrive to seats. He examined them critically from under drawn brows, at length saw that all were present and leaned back in his chair.

"From now on every employee in this building will devote all his energies to one end," he stated. "That end is simple—to stir up public hatred against the *Heavenly Toys*."

The departmental chiefs exchanged glances. One, white-haired, cleared his throat.

"That will not help sales, Mr. Russell—"

"I'm not concerned with sales, now! Russell's eyes flashed.

"But it seems an odd request. It will ruin the reputation which you, Mr. Russell, have built up so carefully—"

Russell snorted. "To hell with my reputation! These *Toys* are alien—*dangerous*! They must be stopped! I want you to show them up for what they are!"

"And what are they, Mr. Russell?" The voice was kindly.

"Alien impostors!" He struck the desk upon which lay the report Gaber had sent in. "I have the information here. It's up to you to use it! I want features condemning them—articles exposing them—news paragraphs showing how deadly dangerous they are—"

He paused, breathless, examining the startled faces before him. He sensed that he was losing. The white-haired chief took the report and glanced through it. His brows rose in amaze and astonishment came to his face.

"Have you any reason to doubt Dr. Gaber's—sanity," he ventured. "This is an amazing document—"

He shook his head sadly over it. Russell stood up, towering above his desk and above them.

"It's true, every word!"

The other looked down. "I—I am not convinced, Mr. Russell. I would not care to jeopardise my reputation by publicising such a report, even under orders."

Russell swore roundly. "Who's boss here? Who built this agency up from a back room with a couple of junk typewriters and two on the staff? Who gives orders here—?"

The white-haired man rose with dignity and replaced the report on the desk. "If you feel that way, Mr. Russell, I have no alternative but to offer my resignation"

Nods and murmured agreement went round the circle. Russell looked at them and knew that he had failed. They would not follow his instructions on this one point. If the Russell Syndicate smashed they did not wish to be listed among those who had caused its downfall, thus becoming ridiculous. None of them would put his name to such a story.

His shoulders drooped. "Your resignations are not accepted, gentlemen," he said.

He watched them file out and knew that the usual news and features would pour out as usual from the syndicate building. Those features would not contain the amazing disclosures which he wished; the *Heavenly Toys* would be mentioned not at all, or in mild, carefully-edited terms

The white-haired man had remained until last. He put a

hand momentarily on Russell's shoulder. "I haven't seen you like this in thirty years, boss. Why not take a rest . . . ?"

Take a rest, Russell thought. That was how they looked at it!

He smiled crookedly. "Not just now, Tom. That's all."

When the other had gone he sat at his desk, his eyes glazed with the intensity of his thought. There seemed nothing which he could do, he decided bitterly. He looked from the window. It was odd to know an alien vessel was up there, so high that it could not be seen. The knowledge was unnerving. A full report was already in the hands of the authorities, phoned on almost as soon as Paul had given the information. Russell wondered whether anyone would believe . . . and official circles moved slowly . . .

His speaker buzzed. "I have a message for you, Mr. Russell."

"Put it through."

He hoped it would be Sam or Linda Tannoy, or good news. But the voice was one he did not recognise. There was a military crispness to the words.

"We have been investigating a report received from you earlier, Mr. Russell."

Russell felt satisfaction. He had feared that high-ranking officials might bury his report in the bottom of some file, there to receive possible attention at some unspecified future date.

"We have also substantiated it, to some extent, Mr. Russell," the clipped voice declared. "Radar observations have revealed an object in orbit round the Earth. It was first recorded almost twelve hours ago by a gunnery unit on the east coast, but was assumed to be a meteorite. After your report was circulated computations upon the object's probable path were made. It was located and is now under constant observation—"

"You can destroy it?" Russell interjected, leaning forwards towards the desk unit, his eyes bright.

"No, Mr. Russell, not even if we wish. Its altitude is several hundred miles, quite outside the range of any projectile or guided missile we possess."

There was silence. "What do you mean—if *we wish*?" Russell demanded.

The other hesitated; his tone cautious: "It seems likely that the object is a meteor which came into the Earth's gravitational field at such a speed and angle that it has fallen into an orbit."

"But it's not!" Russell almost pounded his desk in fury. "It's a *ship*! Can't you *see* that?"

"Of course not!" The officer sounded annoyed. "The radar screens do not reveal shape or other features, at that range—"

"But there are telescopes!"

"An exceptionally powerful instrument would be required. Furthermore, the object is for long periods on the dark-side of the planet. Cloud and haze further restrict observation."

The speaker went silent and Russell knew that the other had switched off. As an officer, he was apparently ready to do his duty, but resented criticism from mere civilians . . . "*A meteor!*" Russell growled. He called the central desk secretary.

"I want a report sent to every leading observatory in this country and abroad. An object of unknown form is in orbit round Earth. Got that? Get its bearings and calculated velocity from military headquarters. They'll have no reason to hold back the information. The Agency requires a photograph of that object. The person who can supply one can name his own price. Ring me back if anything happens."

He switched off, put his elbows on the desk and his chin on his hands. He doubted whether a photo would be obtained. Many observatories would be insufficiently interested to divert from routine work. Atmospheric conditions would have to be nearly perfect to obtain any kind of usable shot, while haze, cloud, rain or fog would render the search impossible.

He depressed the button again; the desk girl's voice came enquiringly: "Yes, Mr. Russell?"

"Get Dr. Gaber of the physics institute to call me."

He switched off and sat back, running over possibilities. The Russell News Syndicate was not big enough to fight the matter alone, he decided ironically. People disbelieved. That disbelief blocked the spread of news such as he wished to disseminate. He frowned impatiently until the buzzer sounded..

"You wanted to hear from me, Mr. Russell?" Gaber's voice was tired.

"Yes, doctor. Can you suggest any means of destroying our enemy?"

There was a long, long pause. "People cannot be made to hate them," Gaber said at last. "That is their great defense, and our unsurmountable weakness. They are now present in enormous numbers."

He halted, and Russell's shoulders drooped. "You can't suggest a means?"

"—No."

"I see," Russell said flatly. "I appeal to you, as the man who

knows most about them! They *must* be destroyed!"

There was another pause. "I can promise nothing," Gaber said at last. "From the first I realised their danger. But I've found no weakness in them. We're helpless."

"That is your considered opinion?"

Seconds passed. "Yes," Gaber stated finally. "I'm sorry. *Quite* helpless"

"Though humanity depends on it."

"Yes, though humanity itself depends upon it."

"Thanks" Russell switched off the desk unit. Thus it was everywhere, he thought. People did not realise their danger; those who did would—or could—do nothing. The ship from which the invaders had come was too high to be reached. The invaders themselves were present in their millions, and invulnerable.

Only after a long time did his hand move to the switch.

"Yes, Mr. Russell?" The desk girl sounded tired.

"Send the following memo. to Dr. Gaber: Late employee Sam Tannoy always evidenced certain degree of immunity. Obtain his medical history and endeavour to discover cause of this. Russell.

He waited for confirmation, then switched off. He had done his uttermost, he thought. No man could do more. He had used every resource he possessed.

He rose stiffly, swaying from fatigue. He stood by the window a moment. The streets outside were quiet. Only an old man was in sight, hurrying as if longing to be home No vehicles passed. His gaze followed the bent, shuffling figure. The old man clutched a brown-paper parcel possessively, half concealing it with his open coat as if fearing someone would try to take it from him

Chapter XII.

"I won't tell you where she is until you give me back my china girl," Jones repeated stubbornly.

Sam gazed into his lowering face and knew he meant it. Sam wondered what to do. He looked round the encircling buildings of the *Heavenly Toy Co.* Linda might be in any of them—or miles away.

We'll go into that later, Jones," he said patiently. "I want to make a report to my boss—it's urgent. You can come with me—"

Jones grinned nastily. "You've had me that way before!" he declared knowingly. "I'm not so big a fool as you think! Give me back my china girl and I'll tell you where your daughter is! I'm not bargaining—I'm *telling you*."

Sam suppressed an oath. After swirling darkness and a wrenching succession of bumps he had found himself upon the hillside a full half-mile from the *Heavenly Toy Co.* buildings. He still trembled to think of what would have happened if the teleportation apparatus had been switched off a bare tenth of a second earlier He had reached the buildings to find Jones looking for him. Jones had found Linda half unconscious just inside the main store-room. He had seen in her an opportunity to get even.

"I ain't forgot how you locked me in, Tannoy!" he growled. "I saw that other chap leaving about ten minutes after I took your daughter away. I was in two minds whether to give him a beating up"

So Paul had got through, Sam thought. Paul would have found Linda if Jones had not taken her away.

Sam groaned. "We're not trying to take a rise out of you, Jones! Bigger things are at stake." It seemed hours since he had arrived on the hillside, he thought. The walk down to the factory had been laborious, with his foot still hurting. It seemed, too, that he had argued with Jones for hours. "Can't you forget what happened? I'll buy you another *Heavenly Toy*."

Jones lower lip stuck out. "Don't want another!"

"Then I'll help you to look for the one you had—"

Jones snorted. "Lies!" he declared. "You're trying to trick me!"

Sam felt desperate; the desperation lent him new strength. Reaching an abrupt decision, he sprang at Jones, pinioning his arms to his sides and bearing him down to the ground. Jones landed with a thud expelling the breath from his lungs. He heaved, flailing with feet and knees, his eyes red with fury. Sam straddled his chest, sitting on his stomach, and banged his head upon the concrete. Jones swore.

"Where's Linda?" Sam snapped.

Jones tried to fling him off. Sam clung in position. This was no time for politeness, he thought. Too much was at stake.

He rapped Jones's head smartly on the unyielding ground again. "Talk! Quick!"

"I knew you were tricking me!" Jones grated between clenched teeth.

"We'll discuss that later! Where is she?"

Jones struggled. "What if I won't tell you?"

"You're *going* to tell me!" Sam declared. He bumped the other's head. "The sooner you do the happier you'll be!"

He repeated the action several times. Jones's red eyes watered.

"Talk," Sam said.

"I—I—*stop* it, Mr. Tannoy . . ."

Sam was still. "Quick," he urged. "No fooling! *Where is she?*"

"In—in the little disused hut back of the offices . . ."

"We'll see!"

Sam rose and jerked the other upright. Holding the back of his coat he marched him round to the rear of the office buildings. He assumed that in another half-hour, at the most, some of the staff would begin to arrive. It would be best to be gone, by then.

A wooden hut with no windows had its door locked on the outside. Holding Jones with one hand he flung it open. Linda, conscious, sat on an empty crate. Her eyes lit up.

"No fainting and no heroics," Sam told her. "There isn't time. Follow me."

When she was outside he pushed Jones in. "This is only to keep you out of trouble." He locked the door. "That will do until someone hears him."

He took Linda's arm, supporting her. Her face was white, but she smiled. Sam realised for the first time how deadly tired he himself was, but shrugged the feeling away.

"The sooner I can get to Russell the better," he declared.

They started towards the main gates.

* * * *

"I should have been here before if the police hadn't asked so many questions," Sam pointed out. "Who's idea was it to have a cordon?"

"An official order, and sound enough, in its way." Russell examined Sam with tired eyes. "So you substantiate what Paul Hardniss said—not that I doubted him."

"I do." Sam recalled the profound joy with which Russell had met him on the stairway below, and ascended with him to the upper office. "I'll repeat it on oath if you wish."

"Other people wouldn't be convinced, even then," Russell objected sadly. "I've done all I can. Everything seems to have reached a dead end."

Sam lowered his gaze. Linda was home, safe—if any of

them were that, now But the vast alien ship was still brooding somewhere high above, waiting All over the Earth the Cyenids waited, too

Russell's desk communicator buzzed in the silence. "Dr. Gaber to see you, Mr. Russell."

"Send him up."

Gaber's brows rose when he saw Sam. He gave a jerky little bow and halted by the desk.

"I've been enquiring on the lines suggested in your memo. Mr. Russell."

Russell nodded, indicating Sam. "Here's your man—if you have any more questions he won't mind."

Gaber sat on the edge of the desk, his keen eyes appraising Sam. Sam felt uncomfortable under their sharp scrutiny.

"You have always experienced some degree of—*immunity* to the attractions of the *Heavenly Toys*, Mr. Tannoy," Gaber stated suddenly.

Sam nodded. "I've felt their power, but always been able to resist it. Apparently other people haven't been so lucky."

Gaber drew in his cheeks and clasped his hands upon his stomach. "There is a reason, Mr. Tannoy. Some years ago you suffered an—injury. There was an operation—"

Sam nodded. "They put a metal plate to my skull to patch up where a bit had been chipped away!" Often he forgot all about it, he thought. "It's nothing."

"The contrary," Gaber declared, his face alight. He paused. "Have you ever felt any—any *discomfort* when near the *Toys*?"

Sam considered carefully. He recalled the strange sensation as if the plate was warm, and related it while the others listened intently. Gaber slapped his knee in triumph.

"As I thought! The *Toys* emit radio-frequency radiations. That plate screens a section of your cerebral-cortex, thereby protecting you. The slight heating would arise from the induced eddy currents. It is a standard application of electro-magnetics."

Sam felt almost disappointed. So it was not his personal will-power and determination! Only because he was protected from the full force of the radiations!

"So that's it," Russell said pensively. "Other people have been hypnotised into buying *Heavenly Toys* easily enough! Thank heaven I've escaped—but that's because I refuse to go within yards of them." His eyes settled on Gaber curiously.

Gaber bowed his head, sweeping back his hair. There was a

bald patch. "I, too, have a plate," he said. "There was a laboratory accident, many years ago"

They were silent. Russell sat frowning. "Civilisation is going to the dogs," he stated at last. "It's only a matter of time—and not long! You should see some of the reports that have come in during the last few hours." He tapped papers. "These things have got to be stopped—and quickly! We must sweep this menace off the Earth."

Russell was talking in headlines, Sam thought, but it was sense. The authorities seemed powerless. The people themselves did not realise the danger.

"You once said the *Toys* pick up their power from an external source?" Sam asked.

Gaber nodded. "From this space-vessel, I assume. I have found no sign that each *Toy* generates its own power. Power appears to be received by them on a radio-frequency wavelength, and then converted to their own use."

Sam considered carefully. Some bold, definite action was urgently required.

"You could get me a permit to enter the factory again, Mr. Russell?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And a bomb—one which I can carry myself, but as powerful as possible—with a very short time-fuse, say ten seconds—"

"Perhaps." Russell looked astonished. "But I can't see what earthly use it would be!"

Sam rose, swaying. "Get it," he said. "Have it ready by tonight. I've been too long without sleep to say a word more"

Moving as if dazed, he went to his own office. There, he relaxed in his swivel chair, closed his eyes, and slept.

* * * *

He awoke at evening, much refreshed. The bomb was ready—a hefty cylinder with a carrying handle and a firing pin with ten seconds delay. He lifted it carefully into his saloon and set out to the *Heavenly Toy Co.* The police let him by after a brief delay. He drove slowly towards the silent buildings and took the bomb as far as the main gates. There, he parked the car and went ahead on foot, carrying it awkwardly.

He let himself into the store-room and waited. Already light was fading from the oblong of sky visible through the window. Carefully guarding himself against sleep, he rested, thinking of the many things that had happened since Ruth had first bought the present for Richard. Somewhere high above the alien ship,

awesomely huge, would be murmuring on its course.

As time passed he grew uneasy. Finally, long past midnight, he blinked open his drooping lids to find that the pink ring had materialised and that the silent procession of Cyenids had already begun. He waited, every nerve taut as wire, until the last had come, then sprang to his feet, the bomb in one hand . . .

As he leapt through the pink ring he hoped that there were no electrical charges there which would detonate the explosives. He seemed to pitch headlong through an infinity of space, landing almost immediately in the centre of a chamber which he recognised. There, he ran, the layout of the corridors and passages leading to the great power-plant vividly engraved on his mind.

Cyenids scattered, pink dots wobbling. A mechanism appeared from a side turning, scanners striving to pick him up. He gained the power-chamber, pressed the firing pin, flung the bomb full into the middle of the complex equipment, and turned to run.

As he ran he counted. The mobile apparatus appeared ahead, blocking his path. He sprinted down a side passage, lost his way, emerged upon the great external platform, and raced on, gasping. *Ten seconds had been too brief a time*, he thought. *He should have had a longer fuse!*

He gained a corridor he recognised, flung himself down it, and emerged into the chamber where the pink teleportation ring still glowed. He leapt through headlong, conscious that he had already counted up to ten . . .

He rolled on concrete, staggered up, and gained the store-room door. In the heavens above, immeasurably high, a vivid spark of light blinked on. It turned from yellow to vivid red and green, dripping vast globes of incandescent metal from the heavens. Watching it, Sam knew that he had succeeded. The power-plant of the ship had blown up, adding a million-fold to the explosive power of the hand bomb.

Inside the store pink dots oscillated frantically about the fragile, wire-like structures that stood revealed in all their helplessness. The Cyenids themselves were pitifully weak, Sam thought. Only in the complicated mechanisms they had built had their strength been . . .

As he drove back he often looked heavenwards through the open roof of his saloon. The ship burned on and on, falling like a meteor earthwards. As it reached denser atmosphere new fury leapt out, flames licking over rendered fragments of white-hot metal that twisted and fluttered away. Ruddy, glowing embers, it

at last disappeared beyond the horizon, quite fifty miles to the south, Sam decided.

At the outskirts of the city he almost stopped, amazed. Windows were being flung open; angry men were kicking globular forms down the streets, or jumping in fury on fragile mechanisms that had suddenly become revealed as power failed. Thus it would be all over the world, Sam thought triumphantly.

As he stopped at the Russell Syndicate building a form stepped from the shadows. Jones, his clothing torn . . . Sam retreated. He had fought too much, striven too much, already—

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Tannoy," Jones said. "I didn't know—I'm sorry—"

He floundered to a halt and Sam relaxed. He slapped Jones's shoulder and went in. He planned to make a report—the briefest ever—then go home. Ruth would be waiting; so would Richard and Linda. He had left a message asking Paul to go round. Paul and Linda would make a fine pair, he thought dreamily.

The building was humming like a disturbed hive of bees. Russell came down the stairs, his coat half off and his collar projecting.

"The chair in my office is waiting, Mr. Tannoy!" he stated crisply. "The pictures are beginning to come in! I'm going home! I leave you in complete charge for the next six hours."

Sam started. "But . . . !"

Russell looked back. "Every paper is clamouring for the facts! Give 'em! Every feature, story, article and photo this Agency can turn out is as good as sold! You know your job"

He disappeared. Sam climbed the stairs slowly. Russell's office was overflowing with the departmental chiefs.

"We understand you are to direct us, Mr. Tannoy," one said respectfully. "Mr. Russell said we were to consider ourselves completely in your hands"

Sam took the large swivel chair. Both desk communicators were buzzing

F. G. RAYER



SCIENTIFILM PREVIEWS

News and previews for science-fiction film fans

My friend Ray Bradbury has just put the finishing touches to a 28,000 word original screenplay treatment called "The Meteor!" Universal is to produce this scientifilm of Earth's first contact with interplanetary visitants.

The BBC hit by 'Charles Eric Maine' (olden Anglofan David McIlwain) has been turned from a radio play into a screenplay, and American star Howard Duff imported Londonwards to play the lead. Its title: *Space Ways*.

Mervin C. Cooper, man responsible for the creation of KING KONG, has a new scientifilm up his sleeve, known only as "Operation X." The classic "Kong," which grossed around 2 million dollars when it was new, back in 1932, is expected to rake in about 8 million during its popular revival.

Abbott & Costello go to Venus in their next comedy, after which they are scheduled to meet Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde. Not to be outdone, Crosby & Hope hit "The Road to Mars" in their forthcoming farce.

Paramount is to produce a future film titled "Turmoil" based on the classic *Astounding* story "Nerves," by Lester del Rey, currently editor of *Space Science Fiction*. Philip Wylie is doing the script.

Geo. Pal will follow up the success of WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE with its equally famous sequel, AFTER WORLDS COLLIDE. But before that he'll take us on a Clarke's Tour of the Solar System, based on Willy Ley's "Conquest of Space," with artistic assistance (as in "Destination Moon") from Chesley Bonestell.

Turning from the future to the past, "The Neanderthal Man" is next

on the docket for one of the low-budget Hollywood producers.

Beware of something called "Untamed Women," a prehistoric type picture which was not released but *escaped*. For approximately the fifth time the dinosaurian and volcanic sequences from "One Million BC" are repeated.

"Amazons of Venus," replete with man-eating plant, is scheduled to throw science fiction back to 1926.

High hopes are held for "Crack of Doom" (née "A-Men"), the new Curt Siodmak scientifilm which Curt tells me incorporates the spectacular sequences from the pre-war German sf hit, "Gold." It's about implosion: energy uncontrollably building up into matter and menacing the world!

"Zombies of the Stratosphere" may be seen at your own risk. Also "Lost Planet Airmen," which has no airmen, and the only planet concerned is good old Terra Firma, which hasn't been reported missing yet to my knowledge.

People at the bottom of the ocean—that's the notion of "Project X," a proposed science pic. And Universal has announced it will shoot "The Sea Monster," a—quote—science fiction thriller about a 7-foot *thing* that comes out of the Amazon river, with the body of a Tarzan and the face of a frog. (Bet you a guinea, mates, that in the end the frogman croaks!).

While we're dunking ourselves, will take the cue to mention that an adaptation of Bradbury's popular *Saturday Evening Post* story, "The Beast from 50 Fathoms," will be used as part of the picture THE MONSTER FROM BENEATH THE SEA. The monster will be animated by sf fan Ray

Harryhausen who, after seeing KING KONG seventy-eight times, animated his successor, "Mighty Joe Young"—and won an Oscar for it from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences!

Busy American book editor, sf author and anthologist, Kendell Foster Crossen, has collaborated on an original scientific film script called "Barrier to the Stars."

Somebody named Forrest J. Ackerman has collaborated (with Universal Studio's Charles Beaumont, TV-scripter and author of "The Beautiful People" in IF, "Elegy" in *Imagination*, etc.) on a scientific film adaptation of the noted sf novel THE VICARION. James Mason or Dana Andrews will be sought for the rôle of the inventor in what is expected to result in a 5-year video series. Same Ackerman has, teamed up with producer Jack Seaman, turned out the first three screenplays for the Hull-van Vogt vidipic serial, "Mel Pelton: the Man from the Moon."

L. Sprague de Camp's "Johnny Black" yarns (Astounding) are currently under consideration as a possible "Francis" type series. If you are not familiar with the character of Johnny, he is an educated bear who talks.

The Four-Sided Triangle, as a novel an enduring credit to Britain and its author's genius, has been filmed—with what results we await with considerable trepidation. Its first announced title change was ominous: "Bad Blonde." Its second leaves us shuddering at the rape of things to come: *Girl in Trouble!*

Edgar Rice Burroughs lives on in "Tarzan and the She-Devil."

Dagmar & Lily St. Cyr, two United strips burlesqueens, are being approached for leading rôles in "Space Girl." They should be stand-outs. But there is no truth to the rumour that Jane Russell, Miss Bust-up of 1953, is being sought to pad a part in

"Blowups Happen": this report is strictly a falsie.

Darryl F. Zanuck has announced that he'll sponsor an immensely expensive technicolor scientific film of an undersea kingdom, "The Face of the Deep." Ray Bradbury is expected to have a hand in polishing the original script by Curt (FPI) Siodmak.

John Collier informs me over the phone that he is putting several of his fantastic shorts together for a "Trio" type film.

"3000 A.D." has been completed but is being released as "Captive Women." A thousand years hence civilization has been desolated, but warfare rages on between the Norms, the Uplanders and the Mutates. Radio-actively disfigured men are seen, but what is seen of the women's figures leaves little to be desired.

"Invaders from Mars" will be a Republic offering.

"Voyage to Venus" will be a Monogram offering.

There's also a "Spaceship to Saturn" on the docket, and, sticking closer to home, a "Space Island."

"Atom Outpost" . . . "Ground Zero" . . . "Within the Volcano" . . . "The Gamma People" . . . "Alraune" . . . "Atomic Monster" . . . "Sky Girls" . . . "What Mad Universe" . . . "The Lost One" . . . "The Lost World" (Doyle, in technicolor) . . . "I Captured the Sun" . . . "Destination Unknown" (color) . . . "Thunder from the Stars" (British) . . . "Miss 2000 A.D." . . . "Far Horizons" . . . "Professor Hagge's Private Planet" (Ida Lupino project) . . . "Atlantis" . . . "Woman Hater" (about the last bachelor in the world) . . . "The Cave Girl" (Burroughs) . . . "Lady in Space" . . . "Dream of the Stars" . . . and many others! Watch NEBULA regularly for the latest developments on the world scientific film scene and screen.

FORREST J ACKERMAN

Brainpower

The two governments were so busy bickering between themselves that they failed to notice a third, inorganic, force.

Illustrated by Bill Price

"THE AMBASSADOR, SIR," said the president's secretary, and stood discreetly aside.

The president rose formally from behind his desk. He was a thickset man with heavy grey eyebrows and iron-grey hair, and he had dark grey eyes that looked frowningly on the newcomer.

The Ambassador of the Federation of the Outer Worlds said curtly, "Good morning, Mr. Kenedy."

The president acknowledged the greeting frostily, indicated a chair before the desk. The ambassador took it, settled his dispatch case on the near side of the desk. They looked each other over, like skilled duellists fencing for an opening, or two jungle cats circling each other with bared claws.

"May I ask the reason for this call, Mr. Alardyse?" said the president finally.

The ambassador said, "My government has instructed me to hand you a Note—a final Note on the present dispute." He snapped open his briefcase, took out six sheets of plastic, fused along the left-hand edge into a booklet. He passed it across the desk.

The president took it, ran his eye down it with pursed lips. He said after a while, "This is putting it rather strongly, isn't it?"

"That's as may be," said Alardyse shortly.

Kenedy glanced up for a second and returned to the perusal of the Note. When he finished it, he tossed it on his desk and said with simulated puzzlement, "My dear Mr. Alardyse, you surely do not expect me to accept that? For one thing, it is couched in unjustifiable and abusive terms; for another, it grossly exagger-

ates the situation and refuses to accord any validity at all to our attitude, which is perfectly correct. We're only protecting our own interests, Mr. Alardyse."

"Mr. Kenedy, you have no interests to protect," said the ambassador harshly. As is pointed out in the Note, you on Earth are virtually static in your power requirements. You have no further room for expansion, either in population or in building, while we of the Federation, on the other hand, are expanding outwards on Ganymede and Io, and preparing to move in on Titan. We need vast power supplies for that, Mr. Kenedy."

"And for that reason you think you have a prior claim to the Adonis trans-uranium element strike, eh?"

"That's not merely my opinion but that of my government," said Alardyse. "You read it for yourself in our Note."

"May I remind you that the strike was discovered and worked by Earthmen?" said Kenedy, his eyes chips of frost and fire.

"Illegally!" countered Alardyse. "As a planetoid, Adonis is properly one of the Outer Worlds and therefore not subject to your jurisdiction."

"At the time of our landing on it," Kenedy said, looking with interest at his fingertips, "it was inside the orbit of Earth. That point is debatable, Mr. Alardyse."

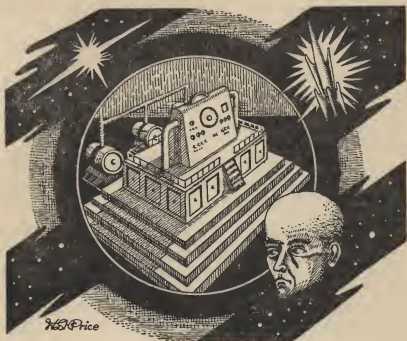
The ambassador said, with a slight change of tone which Kenedy took for disappointment, "Then I can assume you do not accept this Note? That you will not even place the proposals made in it before the Earth Council?" He picked up the booklet.

Kenedy laughed a big, booming bass laugh. "You can, Mr. Alardyse. If you choose to be a little less discourteous and inflexible in your next Note, perhaps I can entertain your revised suggestions."

Alardyse stood up. "There isn't going to be a next Note," he stated crisply, opening his dispatch case and dropping the booklet inside.

Kenedy looked up, startled. He said, "No more Notes, Mr. Ambassador?"

"No longer Mr. Ambassador," said Alardyse. He took his credentials from the case, tore them across and dropped the pieces on the desk. "This counts as a farewell courtesy call. In view of your intractable and unjustified behaviour, my government has instructed me to break off diplomatic relations with Earth. Our consulates are being closed at noon, when the Embassy will cease



to exist. You may expect an ultimatum on the Adonis question within the week. Good day to you, Mr. President."

The ex-Ambassador of the Federation of the Outer Worlds turned and walked out.

Kenedy watched him go with his mouth unashamedly gaping. For the first time in years he was taken completely aback. He felt like a Venusian explorer who had just been swallowed by a friendly-palm. Then the door opened again and his secretary came in, dark and quiet and unobtrusive.

He said, "Did you hear that, Wederburn?"

"Yes, Sir," said his secretary laying a pile of mail on the desk.

"Do you think he was bluffing?"

"It didn't sound like it, sir. Of course, it's possible."

"But if it wasn't bluff, that means the Federation's ready to take us on in a full-scale war. They'll grab Adonis."

"Yes, sir, agreed Wederburn, opening an envelope and spreading the contents, marked TOP SECRET, on the desk before Kenedy. "Here's the new report from Mr. Guterieth of Intelligence, sir."

"But that's impossible! They don't stand a chance. They'll be annihilated!"

"Perhaps they think otherwise, sir," Wederburn suggested, looking up. "It might be as well to find out why."

"Yes—yes, you're right," Kenedy said, nodding. It's a little late to do anything about it now if they have something unbeatable. Should have thought of it earlier, but I never expected them to turn and bite." Shaking his head, he picked up the report from the desk.

"What do you want done about it, sir?" inquired Wederburn.

"Call an emergency meeting of the Cabinet for two this afternoon," said Kenedy abstractedly, "and ask Guterieth to set any agents he may have . . ."

His voice tailed away.

"Yes, sir?" encouraged Wederburn.

"Forget it," said Kenedy from a throat gone dry. He looked suddenly, ten years older. "Wederburn, look at this."

Across the top of the front page of the report in vivid red ran the words IMPORTANT—IMPORTANT—IMPORTANT. Below, in the normal green print, it stated:

Considerable activity reported over the past few years on Iapetus is now held not to be the installation of a planetary colonization pile as at first reported, but an electronic brain of size and capacity exceeding by more than five times (5 times) any previously built. Rumour leads us to believe that it may be under the supervision of Dr. Josef Finklman, system-renowned professor of cybernetics at Bonn University, reported missing, presumed dead, five years ago . . .

* * * *

White-faced the tech said, "Sir, we can't raise Iapetus!"

Blac said, "What?"

"We can't raise Iapetus, sir," the tech repeated, shoving the phones back from his ears. "I'm sorry, sir, but there's nothing coming in on their wavelength except static."

Blac glanced at the clock. It read the state of the solar phoenix reaction and insured that it kept time with every other such clock in the system. He said half-heartedly, "They're only two minutes past due. Maybe Finklman's just so excited by what his baby can do he forgot to call. "Keep trying."

The tech pulled his phones on again dubiously and bent to the mike. He began to buzz-call Iapetus.

"A-1 to Iapetus are you receiving me? A-1 to Iapetus are you receiving me? A-1 to Iapetus are you—"

Blac paced the room. Two minutes lengthened into ten.

Then an internal phone buzzer sounded, and he strode across the room and depressed its switch. He said, "Blac, communications room."

The lieutenant in the screen said curtly, "Your contact with Iapetus is past due. Have it passed up, please."

"Sir, we've been trying for ten minutes. They haven't answered."

The face in the screen went through a dozen stages of amazement, horror, indecision and disbelief. Its owner said: "Blue devils of ten thousand hells! Are they out of eclipse yet?"

Blac glanced at the cosmoglobe on the far wall. Iapetus shone whitely. He said, "Yes, sir. A good half a degree out of eclipse."

"Sweet Mother Terra!" said the lieutenant, appalled. "Hold on, Blac." He turned from the screen, reached for a second phone, dialled one of the numbers of the premier's suite.

The man who answered him was thin, bald, myopic. He said, "Oh, you, lieutenant. Have you gotten that contact with Iapetus—?"

The lieutenant cut him short. "No, sir. We can't raise them."

The other didn't pop his eyes or faint, but the lieutenant felt he would have if he hadn't considered it undignified. He said, "Bright Sol, *why not?*"

"Don't know, sir."

"Bright Sol! And the ambassador due to sever relations ten minutes ago—" He vanished from the screen without cutting the connection.

"—and therefore we feel compelled to tender the following ultimatum," said the premier. "Unless—"

A desk phone buzzed. He said to the secretary who was waiting, "Hold it," and opened the speaker. "What is it, Fontein?"

"Sir, they can't get Iapetus!"

The premier reviewed a dozen terrifying possibilities in a flash. He said, "But Finkelman guaranteed that nothing could

stop him reporting short of a failure of the planet-wide power grid when they came out of eclipse! That, or—"

"Or a smash blowup in the computer," finished Fontein.

The premier said slowly, "And I was just drafting the ultimatum to Kenedy on the strength of our advantage. Hah!"

"Then Alardyse has been to Kenedy already?"

"Must have, by now. If he hasn't, he will have before a message can get to him. We've officially broken off relations, unless Kenedy has accepted that Note, which he'd never do so long as he thought he could win a war with us."

"We can climb down—"

"We *can't* climb down! They'd rub our noses in the sand and glad of the chance. A Federationer would have less civic rights than a dog for the next millennium. You know Kenedy and his cabinet."

"What can we do, then, sir?"

"We fight the war without the computer. We stand a hog's chance in hell of winning it, but we can try. Get out orders to that effect. Cabinet meeting at once."

"Yes, sir," said Fontein, reaching for something below the screen.

"And Fontein—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Pray, Fontein! Pray hard!"

* * * *

The Earth Councillors took their places grumblingly. To be called back from August recess was unpopular; to be called back without reason being given was unheard of and there was a subdued rumble of anger from them, especially those in opposition. True, there had been some rumour of war with the Federation a few weeks ago. Collection of damn fools, the Federationers. Didn't stand a chance. Small fighting force; lots of resources, of course, but no experience, no roots, no unity—and besides, wasn't Adonis, richest deposit of trans-uranium elements known, in Terran hands. What chance did the Federationers stand?

When the president entered, a little late, there was a complaining mutter, and he waited on the rostrum till there was silence. He seemed to have aged fifty years; there were pouches

under his eyes, and his cheeks sagged and looked hollow at the same time.

He said when there was quiet, "Gentlemen, the Federation has the faster-than-light drive."

The astonishment went round the gathering like a tangible wave. The Councillors began to take notice.

The president continued.

"They not only have the faster-than-light drive. They have two hitherto entirely unsuspected forms of disruptive ray, one acting on metals and one on non-metals. The force of the latter may be judged from the fact our outpost on Achilles of the Fore-Trojan group no longer exists. Nor does Achilles.

"They have detectors with a range at least two and a half times as great as the best we have; and finally what we fear and believe is a controllable solar reaction bomb.

"There may be more. Those are all we know about."

He wiped his face and swallowed with an effort.

"We received news of activity on Iapetus from our intelligence agents some years ago, but owing to what we now know to have been clever Federation counter-rumours, dismissed it as an attempt at colonization. We were only informed the day that the Federation broke off relations, after Mr. Alardyse, the ambassador, had served a Note on the Adonis dispute which I refused to accept, that it was actually the construction of an electronic brain far larger and therefore far more intelligent than any previously built. It is said to be supervised by Dr. Finkelman of Bonn—reported dead some years ago."

There were murmurs of "Traitor!" He had even the opposition on his side now.

He wiped his forehead, continued, "As soon as we heard of this brain, we sent a message on a scrambled beam to a ship under Terran command, ostensibly a private trader, in fact a government sponsored reconnaissance vessel.

"They therefore sent an unmanned rocket with a video link to our base at Achilles, which was out of eclipse with Earth, to circle Iapetus and report. At two and a half times detector range that ship was beamed from existence with an energy beam. The message it was broadcasting to Achilles was tracked, and Achilles also was beamed from existence with a second form of ray.

"Our ship turned for home, and on the way passed, disregarded, within detector range of an unidentifiable ship that was

following an interrupted straight line. That is to say, every hundred thousand miles or so it flashed from existence and simultaneously appeared a hundred thousand miles further on. Before our ship lost contact with it, it turned, sighted on Iapetus—and vanished. They have a hyperspatial drive.

"Finally, over the past week, our astronomers have been observing unaccountable miniature novae of fixed duration in or around the orbit of Saturn. They can only be explained as test-exploded solar reaction bombs.

"Gentlemen, before he severed diplomatic relations with us, Mr. Alardyse presented a Note containing certain suggestions on the Adonis dispute. I suggest that we accede to these proposals, at once, before any of the frightfulnesses I have described are loosed on us."

* * * *

The Federation's premier said huskily, "Fontein, they're mad!"

In his hand was a copy of an emergency spacegram from President Kenedy on behalf of the Earth Council, which said, in essence, that they accepted the Federation's demands on the Adonis question and would appreciate being allowed to send envoys to Areapolis to ratify this decision.

He repeated, "They're crazy, Fontein."

The bald, myopic man shrugged emaciated shoulders. "All I know is that their madness has saved us from the bloodiest war in history. It would have decimated mankind, at the least."

"What do you suggest?" the premier asked, tapping the spacegram.

"It'll mean a colossal masquerade," said Fontein, "but my advice is—accept. Since the explosion on Achilles which wiped out the only Earth outpost capable of observing Iapetus from short range for the next nine or ten years, they can't find out that we haven't got the computer."

A delighted grin spread across the other's face. He drove fist into palm with a slap. "Of course! Their intelligence service must have told them about the brain, but not its failure. They think we still have it!"

Fontein nodded.

"Do you think we can manage it?"

"I think so," said Fontein.

* * * *

The Earth delegates seemed unexpectedly subdued at the conference held to arbitrate the Adonis dispute. Partly that was due to the thin Martian air; partly it was their knowledge of what lay behind the innocuous-seeming escort of old ships that had brought them in from the orbit of Deimos. Their leader, one Always, was among the quietest. He sat deferentially at the right of the Federation premier on the dais of the assembly hall, listening to the speakers in his own and the Federation parties bargain over the points at issue. It was not until most of the important subjects had been agreed upon that he got up and surveyed the audience.

He said, "There is one aspect of this agreement which has not been touched on because it was to me as unexpected three days ago as it will be to you now. I am instructed by President Kenedy to state that the Earth Council wishes to lower all barriers of tariff and visa between Earth and the Federation, and if possible unite our governments, in exchange for the secret of the hyperspatial drive and the solar reaction bomb."

He sat down.

Beside him, the premier's face went slowly white as he got to his feet and leant over the table.

He said with difficulty, "That is completely impossible."

For the first time the Earth delegates showed signs of vivacity. One of them half rose, thought better of it, and subsided, his face showing amazement. The Federationers exchanged worried glances. Was their bluff about to fail?

Then the door behind the premier's chair opened, and a secretary entered and whispered something behind his hand to the premier. After a second, the latter muttered, "Excuse me, gentlemen," and went out.

The delegates sat in uneasy silence. Always preserved a sphingical composure, studying his fingernails, but behind the mask, his mind was in a tumult. They waited.

Ten minutes later the premier re-entered with a man, haggard, unshaven, with skin like old parchment stretched over the bones of his skull and hands, but whose intense blue eyes rendered him at once recognizable to all the delegates. The Earthmen drew aside as if from a leper.

Without preamble, the premier said, "Gentlemen, you recognise Dr. Finkelman, late of Bonn University on Earth? Half of you call him a traitor, and he says we may all have cause to call him that before we are through, but what he has to tell us is of

such front-rank importance that you must listen. Go ahead, doctor."

The cyberneticist nodded his skeletal head, and said, "Gentlemen, this conference is a mockery. From what I can gather, you of Earth are asking for the secrets of ftl drive and sundry other things, such as the solar bomb, detectors of unusual range, death rays, poison gases that will soak through the hull of a spaceship, continuum-distorters, time-travel, and the transmutation of elements without energy loss. You may not even know of some of these things."

The Earth delegates looked aghast. They had not suspected the Federation had so much.

"We can't give you those secrets," said Finklman. "We haven't got them."

"Oh, I know there have been solar bombs all over Saturn's orbit recently, and that a number of mysterious ships have been observed entering and leaving ftl drive at many points, and sundry other things attributable to the computer. I've had a lot of time to observe such phenomena in detail during my time in the rocket in which I managed to get away from Iapetus—by a fluke."

"I can't give you the secrets you want. I haven't got them."

"How? Why?" said Always, looking up without expression on his face.

"We haven't got the computer," said Finklman.

"But—" began Always. Finklman raised a thin hand for silence.

"We built it all right. It was to be the biggest electronic computer devised by man. Our preliminary calculations showed that there was a good chance of it being truly intelligent, even conscious of its own existence. All our tests were as predicted. We saw no reason why we shouldn't complete the final circuits and turn it on before we came out of eclipse with Mars."

He stopped, his brilliant blue eyes seeming to stare into space, unseeing.

"What went wrong?" persisted Always.

"Nothing went wrong. Nothing at all."

"Then what *happened*?" almost screamed the delegate.

"The brain," said Finklman deliberately, "is too intelligent to let itself be bothered by men."

"In fact, I doubt if it will even let us survive."

Atoms and Stars

THE ASSASSIN'S jewelled forefinger poised like a cobra above the cross-boned button he was about to punch. The *final* button, a plastic nodule of lilliputian size, but capable of transmitting a Brobdingnagian blow. For Los Angeles, lethal!

The other C-bombs (C-for-City) had already climbed from their cradles scant seconds before. Destinations: Washington, New York, New Orleans, Chicago.

Atoms over America! Just as Will Jenkins had predicted, the murder of the U.S.A. . . .

Four live telescreens before the Assassin's darkling eyes video'd simultaneous scenes of the stratosphere: four jetting projectiles of doom, streaking through the upper reaches of earth's atmosphere, arrowing with Tell-like accuracy for the vitals of unsuspecting America.

Not all the metropolises of the United States must die, but five have been selected for terror targets, savage warnings of the fate of the entire nation if capitulation were not immediate and complete.

But San Francisco could substitute for Los Angeles, or Denver or Detroit or any of a dozen other cities, should the Assassin so elect. The ultimate choice was his whim.

The death-dealer paused to contemplate a factor which previously had been completely overlooked. It was not a military factor, it was one of morale: Part of Los Angeles was *Hollywood*,

was it not? The atomic eruption would obliterate all the motion picture studios scattered in the suburbs!

More important than the film industry itself, certain of its stellar figures rose in the mind's eye of the Assassin: luscious Lana Warner whom he had recently seen smouldering (in flaming technicolor) in "Where There's Smoke"

Sultry Shelley Winters, voluptuous as Jean Harlow in "Platinum Blonde"

And curvaceous Laurel Donn, who made her "wow-bow," to quote the patteresque New York columnist (who would presently ceased to exist) in "Mel Pelton: Moon Man"

The Assassin's sensuous lips quivered. *Foolish to destroy such desirable women, to reduce those alluring bodies to atomic ashes. When the conquest of America is complete, then let the stars with the most flawless figures in Hollywood be stripped naked and compete for my favour!*

And so, because of the magic spell of the Celluloid City, Los Angeles was spared the hell-fire of fission.

But the Assassin's lusts were ironically frustrated, for at the moment Manhattan was transformed into primal energy, Laurel Donn was being fêted at a dinner there

Shelley Winters was sight-seeing at the Capital

And Lana Warner was making a personal appearance in San Francisco

* * * *

Twenty years later, in 1975, when Pan-Time Productions of Hollywood, California, United States of America—not the disunited states—filmed the historical war spectacle, "Rape and Rebirth," Bebe Parro portrayed her own mother, the former child star who, in her teens, had won an immortal place among American patriots by assassinating the Assassin during his "triumphal tour" of Hollywood!

THE ELECTRIC FAN

Latest fan news from the leading light of British fandom

A couple of months ago I was a guest at the biggest science fiction gathering of all time, the Tenth Anniversary World Convention in Chicago. The hotel where it was held—or rather where the organisers tried to hold it, for sometimes it seemed to be getting away from them—was one of those places where you change from 'local' to 'express' elevators at the 20th Floor, and so vast, that there were two other conventions going on in it at the same time as ours. Milling around in this metropolis were nearly a thousand science fiction writers, editors, publishers and fans, all as anxious to meet and talk to one another as to attend the official programme. It's no wonder the Convention Committee were almost overwhelmed, but, given that hotel—or rather, to judge from the bill, having bought and paid for it—no one could have done a better job. Their star-studded programme was put on with no more unpunctuality than seems to be traditional at sf conventions, whether in London or America, and very few items had to be left out. It might have been better if some of them had, because the only people at the morning sessions seemed to be the few who had had their all night parties closed down by the house detectives or who had finally broken themselves of the habit of sleep.

The main feature on the first day was a debate on flying saucers between Willy Ley and Raymond Palmer which ended with the subject still very much in the air but still unexplained, and a lecture on 'Life — Elsewhere and

Elsewhen,' by Nobel Prizewinner, H. J. Muller.

Next day there was a discussion among the editors of the main American sf magazines, all patting one another on the back with only occasionally a knife concealed in the hand; and a banquet at which the speakers were Hugo Gernsback, Sprague de Camp, E. E. Smith, Clifford Simak, me and Anthony Boucher. Even these brilliant minds were outshone however by the wit of toastmaster Robert Bloch, who seems to be America's final answer to our William F. Temple. After this there was a Masquerade Ball lasting until dawn, at which half the fans seemed to be disguised as extra-terrestrial monsters and the rest as human beings.

On the third and last day everyone who was still conscious crowded down to hear addresses by John W. Campbell and Robert Bloch, each brilliant in their own way. A surprise item was a 'Lecture on the Atom' by one 'Professor Updiddle,' which turned out to be an excellent music-hall act by 'World Citizen' Garry Davis, whom few of us had known to be both a science fiction fan and an accomplished comedian.

Other odd items scattered through the three days' programmes were talks on various subjects, a debate on the importance of fandom, a book publishers panel, a guitar and song recital by Ted Sturgeon, an auction, a play, some TV science fiction films and a science fiction ballet. No one could have said the programme lacked variety.

In those three hectic days I met just about everyone in American science fiction, and came out of the whirlwind with pleasant memories of many interesting people and a few general impressions. For instance. Famous authors, there, as here, are just ordinary people, who have never quite recovered from their astonishment at finding themselves revered by young fans, but who rather like the sensation all the same. Professionals and fans mix less with each other than we do in Britain, probably because there are so many more of both. Reports of rowdiness at American conventions are greatly exaggerated. American fans are more enthusiastic and less self-conscious than British fans, which is maybe why they enjoy their Conventions more.

I found both them and the pros very likeable and friendly people, less 'foreign' in outlook than non-fans at home. It's nice to feel you can go nearly anywhere in the English-speaking world and find people who are already friends.

One item of topical interest to us was the voting for the site of next year's convention. This really was fiercely contested, and the San Francisco group spent some \$800 propagandising their cause only to see the nomination go by a narrow majority to Philadelphia. I can't imagine this happening in Britain, where there's neither the enthusiasm nor the money, but we are beginning to have the same problem since the rise of powerful fan movements in the North of England. The trouble here is that while the Northerners have the energy and the ability to put on a convention, their cities lack the tourist attractions of London and the fan attractions of its famous authors. And that it seems as hard to bring one up North as the other. At any rate no Londoners showed up at the recent Manchester Convention.

There's been some resentment about this in the North but the reason was nothing more than London lethargy plus the firm conviction that there was nothing up North that there wasn't more of at home.

However as a local gathering the Mancon was a success. About 80 people attended, mostly from the Liverpool and Manchester areas. The lion of the affair was John Russell Fearn, who very sportingly, came out of his den to be bearded. In a lively question and answer session Fearn, who is also Vargo Statten and some fourteen other pocket-book authors, frankly admitted that he wrote down to his audience because he didn't believe there was a market in Britain for good science fiction. It's up to us to show him otherwise. Fearn also showed a film he had made and acted in himself, and generally heaped coals of fire on fandom's head for some of the harsh things it has said about him. The only other professional author present was eighteen year old John Brunner, who has just sold a thousand dollars worth of fiction to American markets since his first story appeared in *SLANT* a year ago. He reported on the progress of *NEBULA* to an audience eager to do all they could to help.

The rest of the Mancon programme was put over with such efficiency as to prove that the organisers are quite capable of putting on a National Convention and need only the material to work with. Whether they get this or not depends on the London Circle, who will have to make up their minds soon whether to continue to hold the Convention themselves or give their wholehearted support to the North.

NOTE.—In fairness to all concerned I'd like to make it clear that all credit for the title 'The Electric Fan' should go to your editor.

WALTER WILLIS

Dark Solution

The Venusians only wanted to survive . . . on Earth there were other opinions.

They took a man.

Gave him a uniform.

Gave him a gun.

Broke his spirit on a barrack square.

They inoculated him, vaccinated him, his skin flinched to the thrust of countless hypodermics. They cropped his hair, straightened his back, taught him to march, to salute, to obey. They taught him to shoot, to hate and to be cruel. They taught him to kill.

He had a name, but they gave him a number, and of the two the number was the most important. With a thousand others he trained in sweltering forests of Earth, and with a thousand others he marched to where a ship soared like the delicate spire from an ancient dream.

Metal clashed behind him. Acceleration crushed him, and monotony dulled his mind. He breathed air that smelt of chemicals. Drank water that reeked of urine, and ate a tasteless paste.

They spewed him out on Venus.

A world of lush vegetation, fantastic in its riotous growth. A world of great succulent fruits, of soft warm breezes, and of indirect lighting. A world of siesta, of manana, of careless rapture. A world of towering trees, of shimmering wide winged insects, and of blooms which held in their petals all the colours of trapped rainbows.

A world at war.

He lay half hidden in the thick undergrowth, his gun snuggled against his cheek, his eyes squinting along a barrel that

was a triumph of engineering skill. Others lay beside him, grunting as the buckles of their equipment dug into soft flesh, wriggling in mute protest at the sweat soaked irritation of shoddy uniform material.

They didn't speak. They didn't move, their breathing sounded harsh in the still air. They were ready to kill. They were ready to die.

They were more afraid of being taken prisoner.

Something flickered in the distance. Something spun whistling through the air. Next to him a man screamed, staggered to his feet, screamed again clutching at his throat. A tiny dart hung loosely from the folds of skin beneath his chin, it couldn't have hurt, but the man kept on screaming. He dropped his gun, tore at the little sliver, then swayed, groaned once—and died.

The sergeant yelled commands, and guns began to spit their searing lances of destruction. Before them vegetation burst into flame, and the air became full of whistling death. Men gurgled horribly as they tried to burrow into the soft loam, shrieked at the prick of the tiny darts, and fell dying, their fingers scrabbling at the dirt.

He fired, aimed, fired again. Something tugged at the thick cloth of his sleeve, and in panic he waited for the searing agony of poisoned death. Long seconds passed and then he breathed again, the dart hadn't broken the skin.

Fire blossomed from a delicate tracery of hanging fronds. Something dropped from the flames, fell on to the ground and scrambled to its feet. The gun kicked against his shoulder as he burned it down.

From the distance a horn blew. A clear, sweet, somehow elfin sound. Hidden shapes rustled as they moved cautiously away. The firing died, and everything became very quiet and still.

The stillness of death.

He rose carefully to his feet, eyes searching the undergrowth before him, gun at the ready. Nothing stirred. Around him men began to mutter to themselves, some whimpered, one cursed in a low monotone. A soft breeze blew gently through the hanging fronds, blowing away the smell of the gun discharges, and bringing a subtle odour of perfume.

He strode forward. One step, a second, a third, and nothing happened. He took several more steps, and stumbled. Startled he looked down, and saw his first Venusian.

No tentacles.

No necklace of human ears, no scalps, not the slightest sign of bestiality. It was a man, a young man, white skinned and blond haired. He wore a brief cloth around his waist and a belt supported a sheathed knife. A blowgun lay beside him, and over one shoulder he carried a quiver of the tiny darts.

There were flowers woven into the long fair hair, and simple jewelry gleamed from wrist and ankle. The lips were full, twisted even in death with lines of good humour. He was covered with mottled paint for camouflage, and had a great seared hole in his chest.

A Venusian.

He felt shocked. This wasn't what they had told him, he had expected depraved monsters, cannibals lusting for the flesh of men and the bodies of women. They had told him that he was on a crusade, liberating a new world, cleansing it of foul unnatural life, ready for the teeming millions back home.

He felt sick.

A blow half stunned him, and a thrust sent him staggering away. The sergeant, his eyes bloodshot, and his swarthy skin streaked with sweat, stood and abused him.

"Venie lover!" he spat. "Mooning over one of these scum. Renegade! Are you sorry for him? Watch!"

He spat on the body, snarling obscene curses. Deliberately he kicked at it, smashing the delicate features. Blood stained the iron soled boots, red blood.

The sergeant laughed.

"That's the way to treat snakes. Now get back into line and help to bury your own dead, your comrades, dying so that you might live to moon over a filthy Venie."

He turned away, disgusted, and rejoined the few left alive. Together they heaped dirt over the bodies of the slain, and collected their equipment. They avoided each other's eyes. They had all seen the dead Venusian, and they had all seen what the sergeant had done to him. They were all guilty. Good soldiers shouldn't think, and no good soldier ever felt ashamed.

They did.

Venus had no rotation and so there could be no night. They sprawled at the edge of a sheltered glade, resting their weary bodies. Some of them slept, some tried for sleep, and others just

sat and watched, most of them sat and thought, and a very few of them just sat.

The sergeant leaned against the great bole of a tree, and looked at them with undisguised contempt. He was an old soldier, a good soldier. He had never questioned an order, never voiced an opinion, had never even tried to think for himself. He was a brave man, brave with the bravery of complete ignorance, and promotion had come early. He stared across the clearing.

"You!" he called. "You, the Venie lover." He pointed a finger.

"Do you know what he was doing, boys? Almost crying, that's what. He was sorry that he'd shot a filthy Venie."

He chuckled and some of the others chuckled with him.

"Scum, that's all they are. Stinking, crawling scum. I can admire an enemy, someone with the guts to stand up and face you, gun in hand and the best man wins, but these Venies aren't men, they won't fight." He paused and stared at them from the corners of his eyes.

"Know what they do with prisoners?"

They shook their heads, though they had been told often enough.

"We found a village once, and in it we found some of our men." The sergeant shuddered. "What was left of them I should say, we had to shoot them just to end their misery. It was awful. One man had been tied to a tree and . . ."

His voice droned on, painting gruesome word pictures of revolting anatomical details. White faced the men listened to him, and licked lips suddenly gone dry. It must be the truth. It must be. Higher Command had told them so. They forgot the man at whom the sergeant had thrown his insults.

He was glad to be forgotten. He rested on one arm and listened to the drone of the patrol leader with amused indifference.

He didn't believe it.

The Venusian had been human, a white man, a man like himself. He started at the sudden thought. A white man!

Maybe there were white women!

He knew that he would never return to Earth. Traffic with Venus was strictly a one way affair, officers could hope to return, but the other ranks never, and he would never become an officer.

Maybe they would send out some women. Maybe, if he was a good soldier, and managed to stay alive long enough, he

would get one. Married quarters in barracks. Brief leaves at home, and casual periods with his wife. Maybe after twenty years or so he would be discharged, and be given a bit of land to farm. He would rest at his labours and watch the garrison go marching by, his children among them.

Somehow it didn't seem so good.

Something whistled through the air. The sergeant cursed, plucked a dart from his cheek, tried to lift his gun, and fell heavily to the ground. A man yelled a belated warning, guns spat aimlessly, within seconds there was confusion.

A dart stung his cheek. Frantically he tore it loose and flung it on the dirt. He tried to curse, tried to pray, tried to scream in blind protest. He failed, and helplessly slumped against the bole of a tree.

* * * *

Voices were around him, soft voices and vibrant with gentle laughter. Slowly he opened his eyes, and struggled to a sitting position. He sat in the centre of a village, around him were low huts, small clean fires, and masses of flowers.

People moved between the huts and the fires. Tall, graceful people, with rippling white skins and clear intelligent eyes. Men and women and laughing happy children. The women were beautiful, tall and well shaped, and with a rippling mass of fine blond almost white hair. There seemed to be plenty of women, far more than the men.

They smiled as they saw that he was awake and offered him food. Greedily he bit at the succulent fruits and drank the rather tart wine, his eyes never drifting from the lithe figures of the graceful women.

The sergeant was missing, and so were most of the others. The rest were with him, a bedraggled looking bunch in their torn uniforms and their chins darkened with a stubble of beard. They contrasted strangely with the colourful natives. One of them called to him.

"What happened?"

"I should say that we are prisoners."

"Prisoners!" The man gagged on his wine and turned a sickly white. The watching women laughed as they noticed his expression, and he looked desperately about him.

A man approached through the crowd, he was a tall man, blond haired and very white of skin. Though dressed like a native he was not a Venusian, he stood before them, a faint smile on his intelligent features.

"Have no fear, we will not harm you." He smiled at their apprehensive looks.

"I'm here to offer you a choice, and the choice is this. Throw in your lot with us, with the true owners of this planet. We need men, white men that is, and we can use you. For some reason the Venusians have always had a surplus of women, and now that we are threatened with extermination, it is essential that we increase our numbers as quickly as possible. We need men, fighting men, Earth trained and who can train others. The reward is your life and a woman of your choice."

"And the alternative?"

"Death."

The stranger never lost his faint smile.

"We have already weeded out the undesirables, the dark and swarthy skinned ones. The Venusians would never accept such people as equals, for some reason they consider all dark people as being on a level with the animals. Well?"

He sat and thought.

Maybe if he took off his uniform he wouldn't seem so different to them. His skin was as white as theirs, and his hair was blond, suddenly he noticed that all the remaining soldiers were fair haired. Suddenly he wanted to stay, wanted one of their women for his very own. He felt as if he had to forget all thoughts of war, the stupid harness of military expediency, the whole futility of a life devoted to approved murder.

* * * *

Alien drugs flowed subtly through his veins, and Earth seemed very far away.

Their hair was clipped and neat moustaches framed tight mouths. Their backs were rigid, and their uniforms hugged them like a second skin. Metal glinted at their shoulders, and ribbons adorned their chests.

They were the iron men, the professional soldiers, leading exponents of the religion of might being right.

They sat around a table, frowning, looking worriedly at each other and each trying not to show his own fear. Guards stood stiffly by the doors, their weapons gleaming in the soft light. Maps covered the walls, spotted with coloured pins, speckled, lined and coloured, and curling a little from the humidity.

The iron men were annoyed.

The war was not going according to plan. The soldiers weren't doing as they should, not the older ones, not for some reason the dark haired ones, nor the dark skinned ones. They died. The others—vanished.

Like China of old, like India, Venus was winning a war by merely assimilating the invaders, and that was not the correct way. There should be bloodied heaps of dead, outraged women, slaughtered men, children maimed and blinded, babies burned and scarred.

That was war.

Not this skulking in the forests, the poisoned darts, the mysterious vanishing of all the blond haired, fair skinned men. That was not true war, and war is what kept the iron men in power.

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Power over men.

Power to keep them slaving in workshops and factories, in the land and in the mines. Power to blind them with false words, with gaudy colours, with childish lies. Power to drain their wealth by savage taxation, and by constant unease. Wealth turned into weapons. Weapons turned into twisted metal and billowing smoke.

Waste.

Never-ending wanton waste, the mad accumulation of more and more weapons, more and more men to use them, more and more energy devoted to building machines doomed to end in destruction.

But there must be an enemy, for without an enemy there can be no war, and Earth had long since been united. But there was a way, there is always a way. Thin lips smiled, and grey heads nodded in pleased agreement. Quick regulations were drafted and on Earth a scorned section of the population found itself suddenly very important.

The iron men sighed with relief, their medals were safe, and so were their jobs.

They took a man.

Gave him a uniform.

Gave him a gun.

Broke his spirit on the barrack square.

They inoculated him, vaccinated him, his skin flinched to the thrust of countless hypodermics. They cropped his hair, straightened his back, taught him to march, to salute, to obey. They taught him to shoot, to hate and to be cruel. They taught him to kill.

He had a name but they gave him a number, and of the two the number was the most important. With a thousand others he trained in the sweltering forests of Earth, and with a thousand others he marched to where a ship soared like a delicate spire from an ancient dream.

Metal clashed behind him. Acceleration crushed him, monotony dulled his mind. He breathed air that smelt of chemicals. Drank water that reeked of urine, and ate a tasteless paste.

They spewed him out on Venus, a man, a uniform, and a gun, symbol of conquering Earth.

A negro.

GUIDED MISSIVES

Letters to the Editor

DEAR PETER: The lead story was great, packed with action — the two shorts were just that—too short!

The cover is as good as most I've seen on any mag, British or American—keep them that way!

Instead of a long novel and two shorts, why not have two novelettes and two or three shorts. Reverting to smaller print throughout the whole mag. would solve this problem. Long novels can be had by the score from any newstand, or maybe they would look better between the covers of say—"NEBULA S.F. NOVELS"—huh?

More space for readers' letters, please, even to the exclusion of "Book Reviews"—sorry Matt! In any case the books reviewed made their first appearance eons ago and have been read no doubt by most fans.

How about an Analytical Dept. ? should give you an idea of the type of story most popular with your readers.

With interior illos next ish, the mag should begin to develop a personality of its own—and one I hope that will create in British fandom an urge to see "NEBULA" appear regular—once a month, on every newstand in Britain or—anywhere!

After much ado about next to nothing—here's wishing you best of luck, you got a fine mag there, Peter, keep up the improvements.

See you next issue, wish it were next month!

Sincerely,

JOHN HIGLET.

Greenock, Renfrewshire.

** Now that my head has returned to its former size I thank you for letting me have your views on the first Nebula.*

As far as printing novelettes, etc., is concerned, just take a look at my

Editorial. Type size will, of necessity stay at its present size, though, as you will have noticed the font of the depts has gone down to 10 point.

DEAR PETER: Thanks for Neb. I'd have written earlier but I've been sorta busy.

The lead story, in my humble opinion, was shocking. Even had it been better, it was still too long. I never did like James, and this was one of his worst.

Hope next ish's Rayer story is shorter, it certainly sounds far better.

Reading over my scathing comments, it sounds like I've "shot" Neb. Not likely. Because you accept a story that I didn't like for the first ish, I ain't giving up. I want Neb to survive, and good luck in the distribution.

I have another grumble. The cover.

When Alan started his career I didn't like his art. Now he has improved greatly with pen and ink, and I'd say he is very good, but his first go at painting let me down. The cover was also badly reproduced.

I've finished grumbling now.

The two ultra-short shorts were terrific! and even if the "Letter from the Stars" was a reprint, I'm glad you got it. Peter Ridley's break into the prozine was very good to see.

Walt's column was O.K. but every fan has read it all before, so before I criticise that, I'll see something I haven't read. Walt can write, anyway, of that there is no doubt.

Fantastically

KEN POTTER.

Marsh, Lancaster.

** Thanks for writing, Ken. I hope that you agree with me that this issue*

is a step up from the last. Let me know, anyway.

DEAR PETER: Many thanks for the complimentary issues of NEBULA. I would like to give you my brief impressions of the magazine, as follows:

COVER: Lay-out generally good. Hunter is one of my favourite artists and I advise you to keep him for your covers. The only fault I can find with the cover painting is the predominance of *yellow*s in the colouring. This tends to give the drawing—which is really an excellent one—a somewhat insipid, or perhaps negative is the better word, appearance.

I like the dimensions of the first NEBULA, though. There are no reservations here, you have undoubtedly selected the very best size for a s-f prozine. It's a nice compromise between the microscopic digest size, of which I am heartily sick and the more unwieldy pulp size. Keep to this size, definitely. I also like the thick paper which gives your magazine a nice bulky appearance. Why on earth anybody should worry about *quantity* I don't know. It's purely psychological I guess—but I think most fans are like me, and get a kick out a magazine which *looks* good, and that is something these emaciated, microscopic, pocket-book paper backs—laughingly called magazines—do not.

STORIES: Good. James' long novel is an excellent one, and the best I have read by this writer (though I have not read a great deal of his work, I'll admit). Strangely enough, however, I was most impressed by Ridley's short THE ASS'S EARS. I thought that Ridley did not make the most of his subject—his ending was too vague and did not put over the denouement with a punch as he should have. Nevertheless, it was the best thing in the magazine. If you are going to use reprints—and I have no objection to one reprint per issue—try and pick stories which have not been reprinted or

anthologised before. Van Vogt's LETTER FROM THE STARS has been reprinted and reprinted so many times (God knows why), that I am getting heartily sick of seeing it.

I noticed one peculiarity in NEB and that is—you are the first editor (at least to my knowledge) to use "I" instead of the hitherto-sacred editorial "we." Gad, Peter, are you making an assault on the dignity of professional editors? You will have Gold, Campbell (J.W.) and Campbell (H.J.) thirsting for your blood if you don't watch out!

All in all, NEBULA is the most promising first issue of a British prozine since the old TALES OF WONDER. (How I loved that magazine!) Keep up the good work, and I am sure that NEB will be with us for a long, long, time.

Fantastically,

ROGER DARD.
Western Australia.

* *Very glad to have your comments,*

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*To : — A. C. Thorne,
21 Granville Rd.,
Gillingham, Kent*

Roger. You'll be happy to hear that I'll be keeping Hunter for the covers in the meantime, anyway.

Actually, you were the only person who commented on my use of "I" instead of "We" in my editorial. My reason for doing this was to introduce the magazine on a friendly and informal note—a policy I intend to stick to.

DEAR ED. :

Robots Never Weep.

Not, I'm afraid, altogether what I'd call a classic. In fact, at first I thought it extremely corny and not very interesting. But it did get more exciting towards the end, and finished in a fairly satisfactory burst of energy. All in all, I'll grant it comes up to my Approved Standard of Mediocrity—but not above it. Which means that "it's worth reading, but not particularly." In any case, I'd rather read a fairly good long story than a string of shorts, however brilliant.

Letter from the Stars.

In view of the author this story could hardly be expected to fall below the above-mentioned Standard. But again, it's not really such a story as an extended excerpt from somebody's Bumper Fuh Book. Still, I think it's the BEST thing in the issue—which doesn't mean that I LIKED it the best.

The Ass's Ears.

This was so short I hardly noticed it. But I didn't think much of what there was of it. It's admittedly got an arresting central idea, but the author just states it and leaves it there, making it pretty clear that nothing's going to be done about it, even if it fails. Whereas in the vV effort, the leads for unwritten extrapolation are probably the most promising thing about it.

Cover.

Lousy. Two things in its favour—it IS, as you say, accurate—even though I'd never have thought of interpreting

"flame-coloured" to mean blue. And the way you carefully segregate all the legend off the side of the board should be an object lesson to all your rivals, British and otherwise (did I say all? I believe there are two exceptions). But the picture itself is the weakest cover I've come across for a long time.

Anyway, mercatorial regards,*

ARCHIE MERCER.

London, W.4

** Sorry you didn't care for the first issue, but I hope that you'll prefer this one. It is true that at the time you wrote no other British s-f magazine had a similar cover-layout to ours, but since then one British promag has followed our good example.*

The original cover painting of the third NEBULA goes to the person who, in the editor's opinion makes the most constructive suggestion for the improvement of the magazine.

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